

JUST CHRISTMAS

and other verses



C. R. ALLEN

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Just Christmas, and other verses
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CHRISTMAS

AND OTHER VERSES

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BY C. R. ALLEN

JUST CHRISTMAS

Were you ever Christmas, little man?
Think it over. Tell us if you can.
Did you ever wake to hear them singing
"Noel, Noel?" Did the bells go ringing
Out across the sunlight or the snow?
Were you ever Christmas long ago?

What was wrong with Christmas, little son?
Something wrong, when all is said and done,
Something wrong when you had drained your
 flagon,
Burned your little fingers with snap-dragon.
Love there was, and many a gift and token,
Yet it seemed that there was something broken,
Something disconnected. Was it pleasure
Only in the wondering Magi's treasure.

Gold there was and frankincense. They brought it
All the way from somewhere. We have sought it
Sought it up and down de whole creation
Till we're longing for de old plantation.
You were happy, playing wid your brudder.
You were happy listening to your mudder
Reading you the dear familiar story
How the stars shone out in pulsing glory.

How one star stood still above a cave
Hollowed in a rock, and how men gave
Gift of gold and frankincense. What more?
There was myrrh for Him they would adore.
Myrrh is bitter as the aspen wood
Where they nailed Him. He was very good.
We'll forget about it if we can,
But it isn't easy, little man.

THE FORGE

Children are little savages. They are;
But savages have watched an evening star
Pale in the sky, and savages desire
That they should look on sacrament of fire.

But children staring through an open door
In wonderment upon a blacksmith's floor
Discard their goblin semblance, it would seem.
They hear the bellows murmur, and they dream.

Strange dreams. I do not kid myself that I
Was beautiful with atavistic sigh
And dingy goggles glued. The hand was deft
That stayed the tremulous hoof of speed bereft.

Still do I carry something with me now
Who am no more a child. I know not how
I dribbled or was stertorous. I think
Another child stood there upon the brink.

The sun shines on the wicked and the just.
God sends the whirlwind and God sends the dust
Engoldening the butterfly. He sends
A man his features and a man his friends.

God sees how rodents in a trap are drowned.
I watched one as a child go round and round,
And was all stupified to think that He
In His great love could let such dark things be.

I think a blacksmith's patience with a beast
Is very beautiful. I think, at least,
They have some discipline. They are morose,
These burly men, and sometimes they are gross.

I never called a cat in from the rain.
I have no flair for looking on at pain.
I do distrust my pity so akin
To something that is rooted in old sin.

Yet to a dog some courtesy I've shown
Through staying at his side when he alone
Came on new circumstance. It is not much,
But good men's lives are made of many such.

I am no zealot, nor would I rebuke
The drayman for his blow, nor chide the duke
Who runs his Reynard down, and sees him die.
Nor fulminate at fox-hounds in full cry.

For hounds that thread a brake are lovely things,
And hunting is, they say, the sport of kings;
But I would see the patient beasts plod home
Like spectral galleons across the loam.

I keep my hands for any dainty fare
That comes my way. Oh, delicate and rare
To dance to violins, to dance to flutes
Is better than the slaying of dumb brutes.

The cooper fashions, but the strong smith mends
And he that with his hands a worn hoof tends
Performs a Maundy office. So at least
I looked, a child, as one looks on a priest.

Were I equestrian I would mean well
To my good mount. I'd share the sight and smell
Of stable-things, but I should court reproof
For my neglect. I'd let him foul his hoof.

And fierce old ladies would come surging round,
And put my horse to oats and me in pound.
So here's to Merrie England and St. George,
The chestnut tree, the bellows and the forge.

AGNUS DEI

Behold the Lamb of God, a weather-vane
Set on a tower where the tenuous swallow
Comes home from pilgrimage, as who should follow
A holy calendar. In sun, in rain
Superfluous guidance to unheeding folk
It proffers patiently. Who cares, who knows
Which way on Hendon Hill the March wind blows
To freedom. Ecce? Agnus. Take my yoke.

Poor painted brummagem that would take dint
From a boy's catapult. The weather-cocks
That turn in thraldom to the Equinox,
Telling how Peter turned when one gave hint
His speech and look betrayed him, have not part
In that your meditation. All around
The unknown buried lie, whose names upstart
Calling in chiselled silence, "Whither bound?"

Whither, in sooth. Beyond the gates and meads
Of some strange paradise. No man shall listen
To such a lark, or see the spring rain christen
The grass and thorn, but such as surely reads
As Bunyan read his parable. There wait
Under the lifted Lamb the vessels meet,
The Book of Life. Pass not the wicket gate.

NO MORE COON?

" No more coon,
Octoroon
You go way "
So dey say.
" You go home, little feller
To your mammy, and tell her
Dere's no more melon and mammy palaver.
If she comes around de new boss he will starve her.
De old massa's dead, and de old dog he cracks a
bone,
For de new massa plays all de time on his
saxophone "
No more croon,
No more moon
And dere's no more banjo with its twang tinkle
tum,
For de old things have passed and de new things
have come.

" No more croon
'Neath de moon "
Come inside.
Baby hide.
Oh, you little black Sammy,
You must hide with your mammy.
We must wait for de day when dey want a back
number
To set dem a thinking of honey-bee slumber.
I dare say old massa will wait and be listening
When little black Sammy comes home from his
christening.

Come back moon,
Come back coon,
And de banjo will play with its twiddle twang
twack,
For de new things have passed and de old things
come back.

OBITER SCRIPTA

There are treasures in the archives everyone must
know.

There are treasures in odd corners, and it well may
be

Shakespeare left a sonnet somewhere or a folio

For a commoner to come on just like you or me.

There are words of wit and wisdom written by the
way

That would cause a stir at Christie's should they
see the light,

Palimpsests well worth a ransom for a king to pay,

Drafts and fragments that bespeak an epic end in
sight.

There are dungeon walls that glitter with the
pretentious bane

Of bright gold from iron transmuted where in
duration vile

Bunyan, Smart or Wyatt scribbled for a countless gain

Though without the hooded menace waited all the
while.

These I conjure not to-day, but one whose testament

Ratified with failing script whatever good she
found

In the preached or printed word until the hand was
spent,

And the dark wings closed about her world of
sight and sound.

Trifles written by the way, the way we went together,
Oh, who shall put a price on them? As well to
name the cost
Of golden leaves that drift adown the dales in autumn
weather
When the ocean is lifted up and trees are
tempest-tossed.

BAL MASQUE

They dance within half-hearing of the sea
And wood and strings were all their minstrelsy,
And their amorphous measure seemed to lack
A force centrifugal. They looked them back

Upon a corner where a sea-coal fire
Smouldered and darted like a dull desire,
And by the brazier crouched with pensive mien
A ballad-monger in a gabardine.

And when the music died they gathered round
The old grey man, and asked what he had found
In all their horoscopes. The chapman bent
His eyes upon the floor, and gave consent.

They left him where he sat in cloak arrayed,
And turned towards their dancing, half afraid,
Half scornful of the sombre things he said.
The old man cupped his hands to rest his head.

JOHNNY JONES

There is a white road running to the sea
Where all things have apocalypse for me.
It goes by rugged firs that proffer shade
To a red parsonage where once I played,
Then to a Church. God's acre at its flanks
Will listen to a blackbird giving thanks
For what went through the years. I knew a child
Slant-eyed and supple, distant when she smiled
As if she waited on some hierophant.
Her straight white party frock was sacrosanct.
What news had I of echoes, semi-tones
That did bespeak her gaffer, Johnny Jones.
Yet it was so. In some far backward day
Jones contemplated Waikouaiti Bay,
Previsaged thoroughfares with happy throngs,
With London lavender, maybe, and London songs.
This would the blubber be and these the bones
The prince of whales should yield to Johnny Jones.
It does not need a Robert Burns to say
The best-laid schemes of men gang aft agley;
Yet, Johnny Jones, you did this thing for me,
You set a white road dancing towards the sea.

SHORE BIRD

Shore bird, shore bird, out of your hidden breast
Cometh the balm that the watcher craves high in his
bleak crow's nest.

Furlongs of sea would a mariner give for an acre of
ling or heath,
For a window set in a white-washed wall with a rose
bed underneath.

Shore bird, shore bird, here where the mounds are
green

Your voice is one with the quiet yews by the lettered
stones that tell

Of the bad days past with the fall of night and the
good days that have been,

Shore bird, shore bird, it is well with the dead 'tis
well .

Shore bird, shore bird, your passionless song steals
through

From the garden close to the workshop pent, and you
carry a toll of days

To each man's heart as he bends and gropes at the
work that is his to do

For the sleep it brings when the night comes down
and they go on their own fond ways.

SNOW

I did not bury my love, for the lack of heart
To the break at the death of her, but I stood, a mourner
With the ground all cold at my feet, and the sky above
Grey as a brain that's tired; greyer, forlorn
Than ever I knew a sky, and my own brain shuttered
Against the familiar words that the parson muttered
From an open book in his hands. When I buried the
dead

I had no book, but the words in my brain instead,
Then there came the snow, as it never had come
before,

With an interdict on the gate on the step on the door.
And I thought how the living are buried yet all conspire
Forgetting the dead in the face of the snow and fire.
And we who have loved not have only the snow to
clear

From the path we tread to the heart of the great black
fear.

ONE WAY

You can't have it both ways, bracken for the burning
And bracken for the ground-lark; or breathing,
waiting pines
All sun-motes and resin where the slant road's
turning
And blazing in the hearth-well as the cold moon
shines.

Then give me the one way. Bid the pines remember
Half a country's history as we go by;
Bid them horde the ocean salt and sunlight of
November
If there were but one way for a man to die!

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