

# The CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IN LITERATURE

CHRISTMAS OWES MUCH  
TO LITERATURE FOR THE  
ASSOCIATIONS OF THE  
FESTIVAL HAVE APPEALED  
STRONGLY TO WRITERS

By *Dolce A. Duncan*

THERE is a magical thrill about the very thought of Christmas, a joyous warmth, a gladsome holiday feeling, a vision of care laid aside while old and young vie with one another in selfless kindnesses, and affectionate remembrances in memory of Him whom all Christendom reveres as its spiritual King. And this feast-time—pre-eminently the feast-time of the children—has found expression in song and story right down the centuries.

It was in the rich imagination of Northern Europe, of Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden that the Christ story took deep root, and gave us the earliest fairy tales connected with Christmas. It also gave us the Christmas tree, beloved alike by young and old in all English-speaking countries.

Denmark gave the world gentle Hans Andersen, whose exquisite story of "The Little Match Girl" has become a classic in its stark simplicity.

Frozen, starving, dying, she crouched in the darkness against the wall in the snow-covered street. She lighted a match, then another, then another, and "found herself sitting under a beautiful Christmas tree. It was larger and more beautifully decorated than the one she had seen through the glass door at the rich merchants'. Thousands of tapers were burning on the green branches." And her kind grandmother, now an angel with wings, took her, "and they both flew upwards to brightness and joy." And those who found the child next day with her bundle of burned matches thought she had tried to warm herself, but "no one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, or into what glory she had entered."

In "The Fir-tree" which became a Christmas tree, is another tale delightful to young people, because they can so easily follow the tree's reflections, and enter into its regrets when its brief glorious hour is over, and nothing remains but memories and empty boastings.

The selfishness of the true Christmas attitude is emphasized in the opening scene of Belgian Maeterlinck's wonderful "Blue Bird." Tytyl and Mytyl, the children of the poor wood-cutter, watch through their window the gay children's party of their neighbour, with the brilliant Christmas tree, and the gift and shining presents. They have none themselves, nor have they been invited to the party, but that does not spoil their simple joy in the pleasure of the other children.

But to Charles Dickens must be given the palm for his Christmas stories, which perhaps more perfectly realise the ideal love and sympathy which should dominate human intercourse, not at Christmas time merely, but at all times.

Among American writers who have painted Christmas pictures with vivid pen, E. N. Wescott may be given pride of place. He wrote one book only, but that one—"David Harum"—is a work of genius. David the uneducated, rough, shrewd country banker and horse-dealer celebrates Christmas in a way that not even a King could better. In return for the casual kindness of the generous debonaire gentleman to a shy, half-starved, ill-treated child, that child, grown-up, pays a debt of gratitude that had been accumulating for forty years, and in doing so raises Mrs. Cullom from the depths of despairing, hopeless poverty, to the heights of joy and happiness.

It is a charming story, and bears retelling. The boy, child of poverty and hardship unbroken by any stray ray of sunshine, is gazing at the circus tent which seems to epitomize all that was most desirable in his little world. Mr. Cullom sees him, senses the child's longings, and adopts him for a few hours whose memory is irradiated for ever after with

rare splendour for the little freckled waii. For his new friend takes him into the circus tent, buys him peanuts, cinnamon candy, gingerbreads, pink lemonade, and even cakes with which to feed the elephant. Moreover, he gave him ten cents—ten whole cents—the first money the boy had ever owned!

"An' I remember how we talked about all the doin's, the ridin' and the jumpin', and the summersettin' an' all—fer he got all the shyness out of me for the time an' once I looked up at him an' he looked down with that curious look in his eyes, an' put his hand on my shoulder. Wa'al now, I tell ye, I had a queer crinkly feelin' go up an' down my back, an' I like to up an' cried."

But his father was awaiting him at the gate to thrash him for not mending the fence, and for the supposed theft of the money to go to the circus. And the next day, as soon as the boy could move, he ran away.

Gradually he made good. He returned to the village comparatively well off. But the fortunes of the Cullom family had declined. Their land was gone save the small home of the widow, and that was heavily mortgaged. And so, not as a Christmas gift, but as payment for an old debt to her husband, David wipes out the poor woman's mortgages and enables her son to join her.

It makes good reading how the bedraggled old dame is taken to the house and smartened up for the Christmas dinner. Then the dinner itself—the oyster soup, the roast turkey, the succotash (whatever that may be), the currant jelly, the cranberry sauce, the mince pie, the sweet Indian corn, pudding with the cream sauce, and that bottle of champagne—well!

Bret Harte depicted another kind of Christmas in his tale "How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar."

And the poets have their say, too. Who does not know Milton's stately ode on the Nativity? It is pure music:

*"But peaceful was the night  
Wherein the Prince of Light  
His reign of peace upon the earth began,  
The winds with wonder ceased,  
Smoothly the waters kissed,  
Whispering new joys to the wild ocean  
Who now hath quite forgot to rore  
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave."*

Nearly two centuries earlier, Clement Marot, offspring of the French Renaissance, had penned his "Noël" in mediæval French, which only adds to its charm. It is clear-cut as a cameo.

*"Te souvient-il plus du prophète  
Qui nous dit cas de si hault faict,  
Que d'une pucelle parfaite  
Naistroit un enfant tout parfait?  
L'effect  
Est faict  
La belle  
Pucelle  
A en my filz du ciel coné:  
Chantons Noë, Noë, Noë."*

Coming down to the present day, John Masefield's beautiful "Christmas Eve at Sea" deserves to be widely known. A few verses must suffice here:

*The hushed sea seems to hold her breath,  
And o'er the giddy swaying spars,  
Silent and excellent as Death,  
The dim blue skies are bright with stars.*

*Dear God, they shone in Palestine  
Like this, and you pale moon serene  
Looked down among the loving kine  
On Mary and the Nazarene.*

*The angels called from deep to deep,  
The burning heavens felt the thrill,  
Startling the flocks of silly sheep  
And lonely shepherds on the hill.*

*To-night, beneath the dripping boxes  
Where flashing bubbles burst and throng,  
The howl-tush murmur's, sighs and sighs  
A message from the angels' song.*

*The moon goes nodding down the West,  
The drowsy helmsman strikes the bell;  
Rex Judæorum natus est  
I charge you, brothers, sing Nowell, Nowell,  
Rex Judæorum natus est."*

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