
THE MASTER'S CRIB,

A Christmas Message.

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"His Master's Crib." (Isaiah i. 3.)

"She laid Him in a manger." (St. Luke ii. 7.)

I.

IN France and Flanders the barns are used for billeting soldiers. The ox and the ass have yielded their places to the sons of the Empire. As you pass through the farms and villages behind the Battle Front, you will see placarded on every barn the number of the billet as well as the figures of allotment,—40, or 50, or 100, according to the size of the building. And you will be amazed at the number of men which a small barn is supposed to accommodate. If it should be the early hours of the evening, you will be further surprised at the variety of noises issuing from the cattle sheds. Voices in high-pitched debate, bursts of keen wit, scraps of ribald songs, harsh notes of a mouth organ,—these and many others will tell the tale of a soldier's relaxation. If you listen carefully you will be able to learn much of the history and character of the men. For human speech is a revealer of many things. Here you have gathered together men from every walk of life and every grade of society. The University don sleeps in the hay beside the costermonger. A nobleman unrolls his blanket by the pallet of the labourer. The sons of wealth lie down beside the poor—they are all *men* and brothers of a common family. For here no worldly trappings have any avail. The pomp and circumstance of society find little

sympathy—men are recognized for their essential manhood, and for that alone. The fierce light of the War has revealed the dignity and worth of humanity.

If you are a person of any vision or serious thought you will immediately associate this scene with the wondrous event which proclaimed the New Birth of Humanity. When Christmas Day dawns, the truth of the Nativity will find illustration and enforcement in every barn along the Western Front.

Mankind has always lingered lovingly over the story of the lowly Birth of Christ. Men have ever been ready to give credence to every legend and myth which emphasized the humble character of the Nativity. Science and philosophy may scorn the tales as childish, but the heart of man knows better. They are *all* true—even after all the centuries the full interpretation of that unique event has not been made. Just as a prism catches the light of the sun and breaks it up into beautiful and glowing colours, so these stories reveal the many sides of the Incarnation Truth. There are always literal souls who seem unable to distinguish between fact and truth. Every tender tale of the Christmas Festival has its important lesson for mankind. The truth set forth by the Cattle and the Crib is the splendid ideal of the inherent value

of a man. Christ laid aside the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, and humbled Himself to the lowliest condition in order that the world might for ever know that human worth is not to be discovered in any outward circumstance. Not by the accident of birth, nor by the abundance of material things, but by the essential worth of manhood are we to judge our brethren. The Crib is the throne of the Master! All history is a comment upon that shining truth—and yet how slow the world is to learn it. The Great have not always been born in Kings' palaces! The log-cabin and the miner's hut have given many rare souls to the world.

This is the side of the Christmas Truth illustrated by the sleeping soldiers in the Cattle Stalls. We have been taught by the War to esteem men as men, for every day gives evidence of the quality and worth of manhood. Lads from the humblest walks of life have risen to heights of moral grandeur. War is a great test of character—it has revealed to us how little value there is in privilege when a crisis arrives! The pride of caste has been proved a foolish thing—men of low degree have been exalted and crowned in every emergency. And how magnificent it has been to witness the privileged classes lay aside every social advantage and take their places in the ranks,

and there prove that manhood is the only thing that really counts. Sometimes it is necessary to strip off every external thing in order to see the beauty and dignity of individuality. There is a very fine chateau in France set in the midst of towering poplars. When the trees are in full leaf it is impossible to appreciate the beauty of the mansion. But when the autumn frost has stripped the trees of their foliage you get an entrancing view of the house. Even so this tragic War is laying bare the souls of nations as well as of men. When you travel through the devastated regions of France or Belgium, the heart is saddened by all the ruin and destruction. May it not be that God is teaching us that a Nation's greatness does not consist in her broad acres, her smiling fields, her stately structures, but in the character of the people? Was not that lesson needed? Had we not set too much store by material things? Many a man has found his soul in the surrender of external valuables! Many a home has been awakened to the deeper, inward value by the loss of the outward! And mayhap it shall fall out that in the destruction of all our material possessions the Nation and Empire will find its soul.

At all events there can be little doubt that war has levelled many social barriers and forced

us to accept the important truth of man's inherent value.

An Imperial officer was attached to a Canadian Mess. He was welcomed with cordiality. He wore upon his tunic the ribbon of the D.S.O. It was not long before he had won the admiration and affection of all the officers. Then came the revelation that he was a nobleman, heir of one of the oldest families in England. It mattered little to his comrades, they knew he was a noble man before the fact of his pedigree was revealed. The Trenches and the Billets, as well as the Mess, are constantly manifesting the truth of man's lofty nature and destiny. It is costing much pain to learn the lesson. But, however heavy the price may be, it cannot be measured against the agony of the Master Whose life began in a Crib and ended on a Cross!

II.

Many are the pathetic sights one sees in the War zone! Two, however, stand out very vividly in the writer's mind. Whilst billeting in a village of Flanders, the officers messed in the room of a Catholic School-house. One little child claimed especial attention. She had golden hair and bright blue eyes. Her open-hearted trustfulness won immediate sympathy. She would gladly come to the arms of any officer—her big, round eyes sent their appeal straight to your heart. No one knew her name or history. When Ypres was evacuated a year before, she was found by the roadside, pathetically alone. Her parents were probably killed in the sack of the city. No one ever came to claim her, so the benevolent nuns gave her a home. She became the darling of the Battalion, and when Christmas came round, she was the little Princess of the Festival. Officers and men showered her with gifts, decked her out with flashing colours, and set her in the midst of the assembly. The old prophecy was once more true: "A little child shall lead them."

The other incident concerns the town of "Wipers." Passing through it for the first time

one was continually amazed at the strange freaks of destructive shells. One had torn the front out of a dwelling, revealing all the upper and lower rooms with their pathetic evidences of home life. Floors sagged with the weight of fallen timbers and broken stones. A child's cradle hung half-out the demolished window. It was a very simple bit of furniture. One rocker was completely gone and a side was smashed in by a falling beam. On closer investigation, the remaining rocker was found to be much worn and the wood showed signs of age. The little crib must have been used for generations. Musing, one wondered if the master of that crib had fallen in the War! How many sons had been cradled there and then gone out to defend the Home? A long train of thoughts started on their way until mists grew thick upon the eyes and shut out the tender little crib. And then came the vision of a Humbler Cot and of a Hero-child therein!

In a day when men were glorifying thrones, Jesus announced the importance of cradles! He took a child, and set him in the midst of them, and said, "Except ye become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of Heaven." The Child Spirit is the Master Spirit. It has the qualities which make for victory. No human being holds us in so vast a thrall as the Child.

Its simplicity, its unsuspecting trustfulness, its appeal to love, make all the world its servant. Let the cry of a child's distress be heard, and men will gird themselves for battle against the persecutor. In like manner, if a child of nations suffers oppression, armies will leap into being and march forth to avenge the wrong. For many of us, that thought is still the moving cause for our entry into this War. The broken crib of Ypres is but a symbol of the brutal assault upon an innocent and well-nigh defenceless nation. All the chivalry and honour of Britain were summoned forth to beat back the savage and merciless attack. The might of the Empire was needed to tear the tyrant's claws from that broken Crib!

But there is something more to learn from the Crib of the Child. Is it not remarkable how we have all become children under the urge of the War? Previous to that fateful day in 1914 there was much slumbering discontent in the Imperial Family. Class was set against class, creed against creed, section against section. There was little spirit of brotherhood in the home. Sons raised their voices against the old mother, daughters shrieked against the injustice of their sex. Civil strife was threatened, political faction was rife, things looked black for the Empire. Then the trumpet call to war was sounded, and immediately

we were all children again. The one thought was the dear old Home and how best we could serve the old Mother. Sons came from far and dedicated their splendid strength to her defence, daughters gave their hands to unaccustomed tasks—all differences melted away and a remarkable spirit of unity girded the family together. There was no selfish ambition, no seeking after place and power—all were loyal children, obedient to the father's will, and anxious to serve in the lowliest capacity.

What marvellous wisdom Jesus manifested when He revealed God as a Father and all the race as sons! For if the Nations could be built upon that ideal the millenium would already be here! Sons of Empire! how full of grandeur and simplicity that phrase is! The Nation as a Brotherhood, and the King as Father of the Family! Would not that banish any fear that monarchy might grow into autocracy? And would not the people be saved from all the selfishness and avarice which eat out the happiness and content of a nation? Perhaps never in the history of the world have we been nearer than now to the ideal of a Universal Family! Despite the rebellious nations which appear as yet to have no grasp of Human Brotherhood, the world to-day is tender and sympathetic with the desire to live at Peace.

If we can nurse that feeling until all the Nations are won into recognition of the Family Ideal, then will the revelation of Christmas have its full fruition, and the Crib will become the Centre of Universal Peace.

III.

A woman sat by the open hearth and gazed into the leaping flames. Her hair was silvered, but her face still bore the freshness and beauty of youth. She held in her hand a slip of paper—it was a telegram from the War Office, informing her of the death in battle of her only son. He had been the very apple of her eye, the light and glory of life. All her hopes and dreams were centred in him—and now he was gone! No more would he come with laughing eyes and open arms to hold her close. She knew that all his love had been given to her, for he had told her that she completely satisfied his life. They had been wonderful comrades together. He had so often assured her that she appealed to every noble instinct and summoned him to heights of splendour. And now he would come no more! She must not grieve overmuch, because she had sent him out on this righteous Crusade. Though her arms were empty to-day, her heart was full of glad memories. She went to her room and gathered together all the treasures of their association together—locks of hair, photographs, letters, and many other tender possessions. She lovingly fondled and bathed them with tears of pride and joy. But there was still the dearest treasure of all, so she went away a second time and bore

it back in her arms. It was his little crib—a very simple and home-made affair. In the early days of her marriage they were very poor, and so the husband had wrought this wondrous structure with his own hands. She remembered now how they laughed together over his handiwork! But she had made it dainty by all the arts of a mother's love, and to-night a world of unforgettable incidents crowded upon her heart. She recalled how often she had prayed above that crib and yearned that her laddie might be altogether worthy. Her dreams were often of such high order that she trembled lest God might smite her for sacrilege. She had dared to think that her son had the face of a god! All the dear days of her meditations, when she pondered things in her heart, flooded her memory now. And he was gone! He had done a wonderful thing—he had given his life for others! Was not that something like the Master? "Greater love hath no man than this"—ah, well, perhaps she was not too presumptive when she linked her lad with the Master of men. She could stand by the Cross with Mary now and understand things better. She bowed her head upon the rude little crib and tenderly kissed the coverlet.

Men have found it difficult to believe in the Virgin Birth. But is it not always true that a

pure, spotless woman is necessary to give birth to the "God-in-man"? Of course the birth of Jesus was unique and His Divinity exceptional. He was God in a sense that no other man can be. But let us claim for others something of the truth in the Virgin Birth. The divine in every man is always called into being by a virgin woman. No greater power on earth than that of a holy mother! All high and holy purposes are born of her. She summons forth the godlike quality and keeps it strong. Monica, praying nightly for her wayward son, is the virgin mother of the divine Augustine. Why need we always give a physical interpretation to this much-debated doctrine? There are spiritual Virgin-Births—they are happening every day during this tragic War. When so much is being said of the baneful relations of the sexes, let us at this Christmas time remember all the men who are kept steady and honourable by the influence of pure women. They vastly outnumber the other kind! Every soldier is touched and influenced by a woman! Who can count the wonderful mothers who have lifted their boys to finer issues during this War? Who will tell the story of tender, patient wives who have called forth the heroic and manly in their husbands? In the final analysis, the men at the Front are really fighting for some woman—she is the impulse of every effort, the support in weariness, the

comfort in hours of pain! When one recalls the letters he has censored, the personal effects of the brave lads who gave their all—the eyes run down with tears at the thought of the ennobling influence of women. Every man has the spark of the Divine in him—he needs a good woman to nurse it into healthy activity. The god-man is always born of a virgin! The ceaseless prayers, the lofty dreams, the patient yearning, the unending sympathy—these are the mightiest forces operating in the world to-day. When one watches the superhuman efforts of our men during an action, the incredible endurance, the magnificent courage, the constant cheerfulness, one wonders how much of it is due to the broad stream of pure and holy love which flows from thousands of homes towards the fierce, flaming fight?

The highest expression of love is sacrifice. Mothers, wives, sisters and daughters have all known it deeply as they yielded up their loved ones to the conflict. It is not strange, then, that men fling themselves with noble abandon against the enemy, for they have learned that lesson from some woman. The sacrifice in the Trenches is the harvest of the sacrifice in the Home. The Mary who dreamed above the Crib is the Mary who stood by the Cross. And all the splendid women who have loved, and surrendered the loved

one to the call of duty, will share in the pain and glory of the sacrifice. Never were men so divine, never so Christlike, as when they gave their lives on the Field of Honour—that divinity was born of some woman's desire. So the Crib and the Cross are still linked together by the outstretched arms of a Virgin Love.

These are the thoughts which come to me as my mind turns homeward! The Christmas Festival is peculiarly a Home Festival. To all the dear friends, far and near, I send out my poor little message of love. May every blessing be yours in the sanctuary of your homes! May Christ come to you all, bearing with Him the Love that never fails, the Peace that passeth all understanding!