

The INNKEEPER of BETHLEHEM



By MINNIE HALLOWELL BOWEN

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CHRISTMAS NIGHT

Deep with all majesty,
Shining in light,
Silent with holiness,
Wonderful night.

Love the Creator stoops
Sinners to find;
God in humility
Comes to mankind.

"Glory in Heaven above!"
Sounds o'er the wild,
Mary, the Blessed, holds
Jesus the Child.

Lovely the angels' song
Ringing above,
"Peace" to the waiting earth,
Knowing God—love!

THE INN KEEPER OF BETHLEHEM

THE INN

(THE MAN—THE FLESH—THE SIGN)

So silent comes the evening on the hills,
O Bethlehem,—your clamour, even stills
Before its beauty and the dust is gold
In the last rays that, like a King's robe, fold
In royal state about my sheltering Inn.

These pilgrims weary me with ceaseless din;
Although the coin is precious and my purse
Grows heavy.

Wine!—my blessing and my curse—
I crave!—

When these last guests are lost in sleep,
With its rich ruby I shall vigil keep.

Tiberius is not so far away!
Some damsel decked with gems, perchance will
sway

Her sensuous loveliness in dance to-night!
Mine eyes are hungry waiting for the sight;
The tinkling anklets and the timbrels thrill!—
That lonely jackal calling on the hill
Is not more eager than my senses are
To take life's fulness!—

God! Whence came that Star?

THE ARRIVAL

(INDIFFERENCE—SELFISHNESS—APPEAL)

The ass treads softly, warily,
The stony way was long,
The maiden, drooping wearily,
Can hardly strength prolong.
Behold, she hath a gentle face,
Of loveliness so still,
Of patience and of tenderness
That all her need might fill;
The man walks slowly by her side,
Serene of face and strong to guide.

The fig tree hath a time to shed her leaves;
The almond blossom and the olive wake
Each to her season,—and I gather sheaves
In this my hour; yet these I will not take,—
No rich array—besides there is no place,
The chambers are all full to overflow,
The courtyards crowded;
I shall not lack grace
For those of wealth!—

These humble ones must go
Into the stable where the oxen lie,
Or, make their bed tonight beneath the sky.

(This woman with her tender grace
Brings back across the years
The blessing of my mother's face,
In mist of love and tears.)—
Why should I pause?

Let Memory close her gates.
The long night's pleasure for my presence waits.
Move on, ye travellers, and seek your bed;
The hay lies soft within the cattle-shed;
Find rest before there falls the gathering gloom
For here there is no room,—

I say,—**no room!**

THE SHEPHERDS

(THE QUESTION)

The Shepherds came to Bethlehem;—
No watch tonight they keep;
Because of wonder and amaze
They left the helpless sheep;
They said, a light shone suddenly;
They feared, but in the flame
An angel, singing praise to God,
With words of comfort came.
They prattled of the glorious host
Sent down from heaven above,
Of peace on earth, good will to men,
A Saviour, God of love,
Born here—in Bethlehem tonight;
They sped His face to see;
The tale is one for simple ears,
It brings no word for me.

Why should I bear good will to men
Whom I have never known?
Sing praises to a distant God
Who lives apart,—alone?
I mind me of mine olive trees,
The comforts of mine Inn,
The wealth and perfectness of life
Which I have yet to win;
In thought, the golden bracelets clash,
The coloured veils float wide,
The mystery and charm are felt
Of life's embracing tide.

The shepherds seek this new-born babe,
A little, helpless child!—
The night is full of music flung
Across the listening wild!—
It rings and echoes in my heart!
The chord is strange and new!—
“God manifested in the flesh!”
What comes, if this be true?
For I have doubted in my heart:—
My soul must feel the rod
If I believe!—
All things are changed
If there should be a God!

THE KINGS

(GIFTS—THE LIGHT)

There came men bearing gifts in humble hands;—
And they were Kings!
Glory and honour and a balm for death!
Mysterious things.
They knelt and worshipped and I heard a cry
Like children slain,
Yet, still they worshipped, while above there
burned
A glory flame.

So weak and small and yet, such hands of love!—
Shall I too stay?
What of my life, my loves,—my eager lusts,—
My selfish way?—
I did not know that I had other needs
Until tonight,—
Now, I perceive to truly know the dark
One must see light.

Here is no warrior travelling in strength!
By Him beguiled
Shall I lay down my pride and kneel before
A little child?—
They saw the star and followed—gifts they laid
Before His shrine!—
Shall I behold a day-star in my heart
Arise and shine?

NIGHT

(AWAKENING—REALIZATION)

Why was man born to cherish here
Uprising flames of pure desire,
Only to find each passing year
Has died to feed some lesser fire?

I think tonight,—because I must;—
There is a challenge in the sky,
As if to this despairing dust
Some greater world was drawing nigh.

How solemn is this night! Yet, rest
Hath sealed her fountains and my quest
Brings not a drop of healing dew
My fainting spirit to renew.
The little lamps of earth are gone,—
But lights I never looked upon
Are blazing in the distant skies.

Within me something wakes and cries
To greater things than I have known.

I see my soul,—alive,—alone,—
Before the Maker of this sphere
And trembling, feel that He is near.—
How shall my heart its sins confess
Before this awful holiness?
Bitter the cup that I must take;—
A voice rings out, "Awake! Awake!
And bare before the eternal gaze
The evil burden of thy days!"

God! If Thou art—some vision give
That I may know my soul shall live!

THE VISION

(BELIEF—LIVING-GLORY)

God, in His mercy, hears my bitter cry
And Time rolls back its hours!—
For such as I!

There falls a sudden brightness through the
night!
Like that first dawn when God created light;
An intimate nearness of immortal things:—

I feel the outgoing rush of mighty wings!—
I hear the wonder of the Perfect Song,
That lofty strain the ages shall prolong,
Extend and magnify,—which still shall grow
Through every change Eternity may know.—
I see the holy angels come to earth,
Shining and white, to hail the heavenly birth;—
I know Love manifest to do God's will!
His Peace that comes to earth serene and still.

O holiest Vision!—linking us with heaven!—
The way is open—trespasses forgiven.

The vision fades, the mysteries depart!—
Never this living glory from my heart!

WORSHIP

(SURRENDER—LOVE)

Now, in the silence of this Holy night,
Behold my soul,
Seeing the purpose and the use of life,
Finding its goal.
He, who is one with God, hath stooped to wear
This mortal frame;
He, the Eternal, teaching us to love,—
Bearing a Name!

Hear me, my God! Receive my earnest prayer;
Thy love enshrine
Within this ancient citadel of self
And make it Thine.

O Love, who came to earth to show the way,
My life I give
And know that ever, in Thy strength alone
My soul shall live.
Lowly I kneel before Thy Manger Throne
And worship bring,—
O Love Divine!—O Saviour of the world!
O heavenly King!

ADORATION

(SUBMISSION—HUMILITY)

I will go down to the stable where He was laid,
God-head eternal, reigning ere worlds were made:
There will I kneel in the silence before my Lord,
Ever by all creation to be adored:
There shall my life be given, His love to own;—
There shall my heart be offered to be His throne:—
Suffering,—love,—adoration—the world shall bring
Here to the Wonder of Wonders!—
For **He is The King.**

THE LITTLE SONG

(PRAYER)

I shall go down to the stable,
For the Child lies there in the hay,
The ox and ass will be standing
In their gentle, silent way;
They will watch me kneel by the manger
And will hear the words I say.

I have come, O little Lord Jesus!
To worship here at Thy feet,
I have nothing precious to offer,—
No gift that is pure and meet,
But I bring you my soul, Lord Jesus;—
O take it and make it sweet.

Make it Thy servant in trouble,
Thy soldier in hardest dole;
It is stained and Thy hands are holy,—
But take it and make it whole;
I have nothing to give,—Lord Jesus!
I pray Thee to take my soul.

BECAUSE OF LOVE

When Love looked down from the heavens
The heights and the depths of blue
Were filled with a holy presence,
For the face of God shone through,
To look on the earth in darkness,
With no man to show the way
To His Kingdom of peace unveiling
The dawn of a glorious day.

When Love came down from the heavens
The song of the spheres was still,
So great was the awe and wonder
Before the Almighty will;
But anthems of adoration
Broke forth like a flame and ran
Through earth in its desolation
For Love that had stooped to man.

He took our nature upon Him!
He lived and suffered and died!
The sorrows and sins of ages
Were borne by the crucified.
As seeds that stir in the darkness
To lift from the clinging sod,
So souls sprang up into beauty
Beholding the love of God,

Aware of divine compassion
Too great to be understood,
For the weakest soul and the poorest
Through Him could attain to good,
Could leave the pathways of evil
To follow in humble love
The Saviour whose love and passion
Drew sinners to God above.

Is it nothing to you—O people!
The Cross you are passing by?
This love you may know and answer,
This need you can satisfy
And one with the army of ages
Your lives may an offering bring,
A tribute of love and remembrance
To glorify Jesus—the King.

TAKE HEART!

Take heart, although the way alone be far
And desolate the soul;
No life that keeps the leading of a star
Can ever miss the goal.

The sin repented, yet may send a light
To guide another's way
And failure be a beacon in the night
When fades uncertain day.

This sorrow, living in the root of pain
Through earth's dark-shrouding hour,
Shall find no sacrifice is made in vain—
Shall bloom, a glorious flower.

This faith that gave an amplitude of trust
Nor claimed proof as its right,
Shall yet be justified in mortal dust
That wins eternal sight.

This love that gave the utmost in its power,
Breathed-deep eternal breath,
Shall be uplifted in life's tragic hour
To triumph over death.

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