

Merry Christmas

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THE CHRISTMAS AFTERGLOW

By WILLIAM L. STIDGER

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THE annual celebration of Christmas makes us all a little kinder, taller and gentler. There is an "Arizona afterglow" to the Christmas celebration which leaves a crimson, golden glory in our skies and in the skies of the whole world.

Whenever I come to the Christmas season and begin to catch the beauty of this immortal story, I am taken back several years to a Greek class taught by the New Testament scholar, Dr. Marcus D. Buell, at Boston University School of Theology. He had given us his interpretation of the Scriptures account of those characters who had been mysteriously summoned to the stable, and then began to speculate on what happened to them afterward. He said: "I always like to translate that text 'And the shepherds returned' in this way: 'And the shepherds returned to their flocks.' Or, if you wish: 'The shepherds returned to their sheep.'"

"That translation is true to the Greek and it is even more true to the universal experience of life; all man, after any great spiritual experience, must go back into the everyday things of life. We have to go back to the dishwashing, to the sweeping of floors, the darning and mending of little stockings, the patching of pants; back to the grocery store, the bookkeeping; back to the tall buildings in the cities; back to what might be called the mundane things of life; back to living and making a living.

"I want you young gentlemen to note what the text says about what happened to the participants of that early Christmas drama. Note that the Wise Men, after having seen the immortal Christ Child with their own eyes, each returned another way to his country. And, if you use your God-given imaginations, you will know that each of those Wise Men—for they were wise men—went back to his country a bigger, taller, kinder and better and wiser man than when he came to that great rendezvous."

There was a hush on that crowd of students as their favorite teacher continued: "And note, young gentlemen, what it says about the mother of Jesus, one of the most beautiful sayings in the New Testament, a poem in itself. It says: 'And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.'"

On and on the great teacher went with his original interpretation of the Christmas story, impressing upon us the truth that the vital thing about the spirit of Christmas is how it eventuates in human life. If the glow and glory of the Christmas experience makes a human being taller, kinder, more loving, more conscious of the needs of other human beings, then it becomes real. It is what carries over into life that causes it to have meaning and power.

The poets have taught me that Dr. Buell's interpretation of the Christmas story is the universal and the practical interpretation. Edwin Markham caught its full meaning in his poem "The Shoes of Happiness," the last stanza of which reads:

Now have the homely things been made

Sacred, and a glory on them laid,
For whose shelter was a stall,
The King, was born among them all.

He came to handle saw and plane,
To use and hallow the profane:
Now is the holy not afar
In temples lighted by a star.

Holland Opens Holiday Early

In Holland, the Christmas season begins early, on the fifth day of December. That is the eve of the name-day of St. Nicholas, the good Bishop of ancient Myra. It is told of him that he wandered the streets in the dead of night, leaving food, clothing and money at the homes of his most needy parishioners.

On the night of December 5, St. Nicholas, or "Sinterklaas," as the Dutch call him, returns, according to legend. Dressed in full regalia, with his jeweled miter on his head and bearing a golden staff, he rides on a white charger. With him is Piet, his Moorish servant. Piet carries a bag filled with gifts but also, alas and alack, has a rod for children who do not deserve a gift.

But where the loves and labors are.

Now that the King has gone this way,

Great are the things of every day.

And, if Edwin Markham had not confirmed the interpretation that Dr. Buell gave us of the Christmas story, then John Masefield in "The Everlasting Mercy" did so most effectively in these lines:

He who gives a child a treat
Makes joybells ring on heaven's street;

He who give a child a home
Builds palaces in Kingdom Come;
And she who gives a child its birth
Brings Savior Christ again to earth.

If the poets had not taught me this truth of the Christmas story, life itself has taught it. Most of us know what it means to have summer vacation experiences which lift our souls into new spiritual beauties. We have visited the Yosemite, the Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, the Catskills, the thundering, awe-inspiring grandeur of a Niagara; and we know that, once having had such experiences, our souls have never been the same.

We cannot always be on vacation. We cannot always dwell on some mountain peak. We cannot always live close enough to touch the stars. We ultimately have to come back from vacations and the Christmas experiences. We must, like the shepherds, get back to our flocks. But, glory be to God, we can bring back with us the memories and the spiritual ecstasies of great experiences into the mundane walks of life!

"And the shepherds returned to their sheep." But when they returned they had a great and rich and lifeliving memory of kneeling at the manger of a little child, of angels singing, of a star shining in the sky.

And, even if the poets had not taught me, and life's experiences had not fused in my soul the interpretation my old theological teacher gave me of the Christmas story, then a book I read a few years ago gave me a simple story to press it deep into my heart. The book was entitled "The Little Old Lady," and it was written by Dr. Lynn Harold Hough, then dean of Drew Theological Seminary.

In that book there was a story about a little boy in a humble home who, on Christmas night, had been permitted to stay up far beyond his usual bedtime to sit on his daddy's lap and look up at the lighted Christmas tree, while the mother (as usual) was in the kitchen washing the dinner dishes. Finally worn out by the day's festivities and excitements, that little tyke fell asleep on his father's lap and dreamed a dream.

He dreamed that a white angel came drifting into the room, flew up to the top of the Christmas tree, gently lifted the topmost candle from its socket, flew down to the little boy, put it in his hand and said to him: "Never let the candle of Christmas love go out. Keep it burning all the year!" Then the little fellow stirred sleepily on his father's lap.

The father called out to the young mother in the kitchen: "I guess he's asleep; the day has been too much for him. I'll take him upstairs."

Gently he carried his son up to bed, undressed him, slipped his white pajamas on, and laid him in his little bed without waking him. Then he tucked him in, bent over and kissed his hot cheeks good-night.

But, just as he lifted himself from that good-night kiss, the little boy stirred, reached his arms around his father's neck, pulled him down until the father's cheeks were against his baby face and said sleepily, "Daddy, please don't let the candle go out or the Christmas angel go away."

Mystified, that young father went downstairs and told the mother what the boy had said, wondering what it was all about. But the mother, wiser in the ways of children than most men are, said:

"Jimmy's been dreaming, that's all. And to me, what he seems to have dreamed makes good sense—we must keep the beautiful spirit of Christmas alive in our hearts all the years through, rather than just on Christmas week or Christmas day." Then she went back to her dish-washing with little songs singing in her heart, and when the father went back to his reading in

the next room he could hear her rich contralto voice softly singing. "Silent night, holy night . . . 'Holy infant, so tender and mild, Sleep

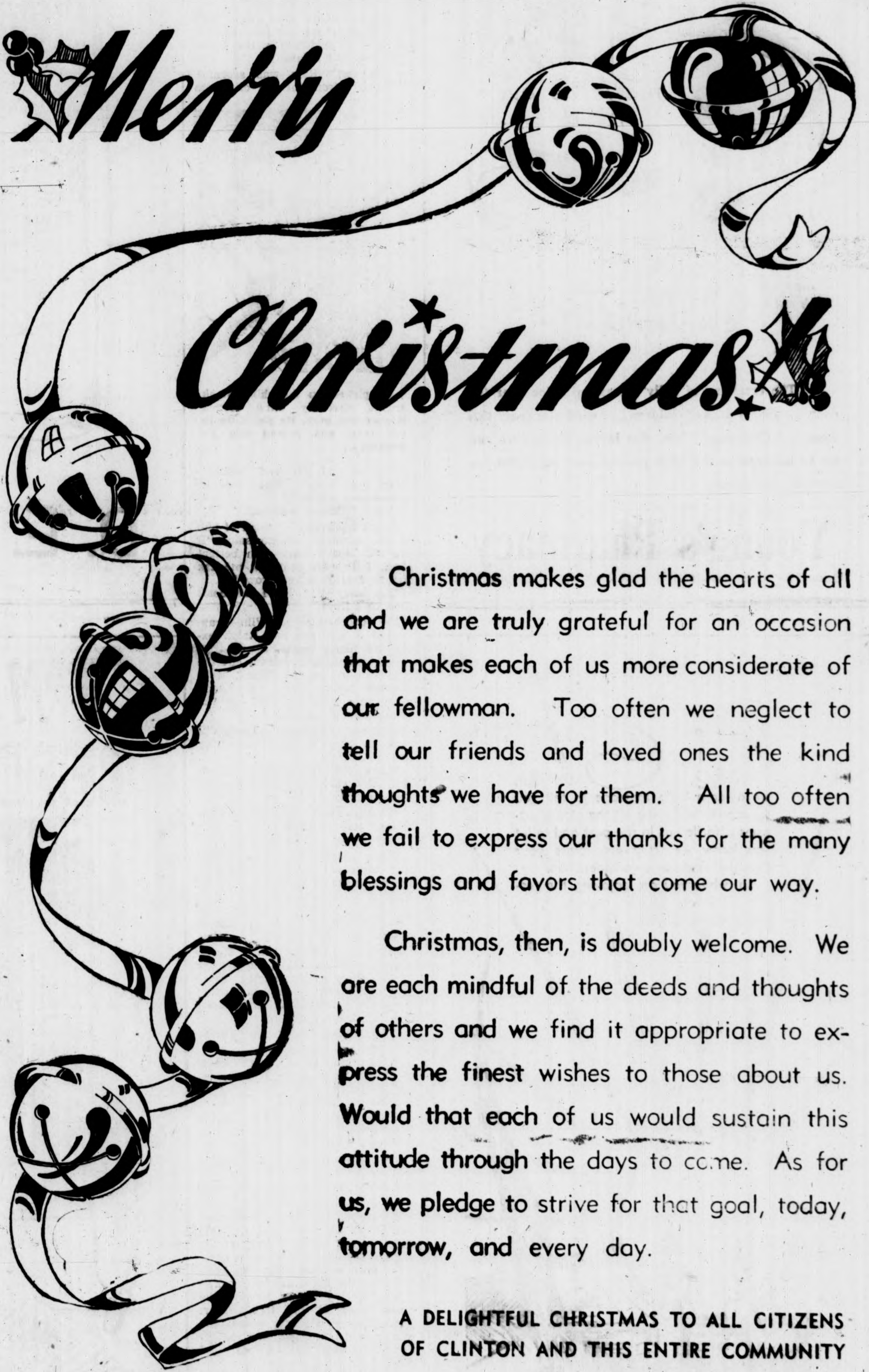
in heavenly peace . . .'" As the husband heard his young wife's rich voice singing above the clatter of the dishes, a mist came

into his eyes, a lump into his throat, and he knew for the first time what the real spirit of Christmas meant. It meant carrying that spirit into

the everyday tasks of life through all the year. "And the shepherds returned to their sheep."

Merry

Christmas



Christmas makes glad the hearts of all and we are truly grateful for an occasion that makes each of us more considerate of our fellowman. Too often we neglect to tell our friends and loved ones the kind thoughts we have for them. All too often we fail to express our thanks for the many blessings and favors that come our way.

Christmas, then, is doubly welcome. We are each mindful of the deeds and thoughts of others and we find it appropriate to express the finest wishes to those about us. Would that each of us would sustain this attitude through the days to come. As for us, we pledge to strive for that goal, today, tomorrow, and every day.

A DELIGHTFUL CHRISTMAS TO ALL CITIZENS OF CLINTON AND THIS ENTIRE COMMUNITY

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