

# CHILD JESUS IN ART

BY REV. ELLIS E. DRAKE.

**A**LL know that the story of the birth and childhood of Jesus the Christ, told with such wonderful simplicity in the New Testament, had taken deep hold upon the heart and the imagination of Christians the world over. No other part of the gospel history has given so many themes to poet and painter. No other narrative



VIRGIN, INFANT JESUS AND ST. JOHN. PAINTING BY BOTTICELLI

In the world has been illustrated by so many famous artists. It is easy to see some of the reasons which have made it a favorite subject. First, there is the religious interest which centers in the entrance of the Divine Saviour into the world. Such an event, for all who believe in the Christian religion, must have a profound significance. It is the sunrise of faith, the beginning of a new spiritual world, the laying of the cornerstone of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Even if the artist himself were not sure of this, did not altogether believe it, he would know that other people believed it; and by the imagination he could see what a supreme importance was given by the faith of Christendom to the brief and simple story of the birth at Bethlehem.

Second, there is the human interest which clings to the ever beautiful relation of motherhood and childhood. The tenderest and most unselfish love is that which with a true mother looks upon her little child; the most perfect innocence and trustful joy are revealed in the deep eyes of the baby who smiles into the face of his mother bending over him. The paintings of the Child Jesus and the Virgin Mary have drawn into themselves the best thoughts of men concerning the gracious secret of maternity and the unstained bliss of infancy.

**Fantastic Legends.**

Third, there is the poetic and pictorial interest which grows out of the incidents of the story, the strange contrast between the heavenly significance of the birth of Christ and its outward circumstances, the blending of light and shade, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, angelic songs and earthly persecutions. All these varied elements, centering about a single figure, afford a field of illumination and illustration such as art loves.

My first advice, then, to those who wish thoroughly to appreciate and enjoy these pictures would be to read and re-read the gospel of St. Matthew from the eighteenth verse of the first chapter to the end of the second chapter, and the first two chapters of St. Luke's gospel. Then it would be wise to read some of the later legends which were woven in the apocryphal books, and in the mediaeval poems and narratives about the birth and childhood of Christ. Many of these legends are curious and fantastic, evidently allegorical and symbolical. They have none of the simple directness and quiet restraint of the Biblical history. They are, in effect, clear illustrations of that native trait of the human mind—familiar to every one who has tried to tell a true story to a child—the craving for picturesque detail. "How did it happen? Where did it happen? Who was there? How did they look? What did they do afterwards?" These are the questions that children ask when they hear a story; and these are the questions to which men have given fanciful answers in the apocryphal and mediaeval legends, such as the protevangelium of St. James, the gospel of St. Thomas, the gospel of the pseudo-Matthew. The history of the nativity of Mary, the golden legend of Jaco-

bus de Voragine, the poems of Konrad of Fussesbrunn, Walther of Rheinau, Abbes Kroswitha, and the traditions given by Justin Martyr, St. Jerome, St. Bernard and many other writers.

Much of this legendary and symbolist material was taken up quite naively by the painters and embodied in their pictures. Suppose you have a picture of the Annunciation which represents Mary as passing through a garden when the angel came to her; that is in accordance with the Protevangelium, which says that Mary was chosen by lot from among the virgins of Nazareth to spin the royal purple of the Temple veil; one day, as she was returning from the fountain with her pitcher of water, the angel met her and said: "Hail, thou who art full of grace!" and when she went back to her spinning he came again to her to complete his message. If the picture represents Mary in the house, working at the veil, the artist has chosen to show us the second appearance of the angel. The emblems which the artists put into their pictures are significant. The pot of lilies at Mary's side, the lily-branch in the angel's hand symbolize purity. The olive-bough borne by the dove means peace.

Or here is a picture of the nativity which shows the Child and his mother and Joseph in a cave. This is according to the account of Justin Martyr (and quite in harmony with the customs of Palestine), that the stable of the inn where Christ was born was a grotto in the rocks. Here perhaps you see the ox and the ass bowing their heads before the child. This is told by the gospel of the pseudo Matthew in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib." Here, again, is a dazzling supernatural light radiating from the child, so that shepherds who have just entered must shade their eyes. This detail is given in many legends.

**How the Story Develops.**

The five chief points around which the paintings of the birth and childhood of Christ naturally group themselves are (1) The Annunciation; (2) The Nativity; (3) The Adoration of the Magi; (4) The Flight into Egypt; (5) The Home at Nazareth.

1. The Annunciation comes from the first chapter of St. Luke, and with it are associated two minor incidents, the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, and the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. The painters have delighted to show us the virginal beauty and meekness of Mary; the joy with which the angel brought his message, and the awe and wonder with which she received the new conception of her son as the Son of the Highest, the Saviour of his people. No picture of the Annunciation is good in which this wonder and this joy are not expressed. If in addition the painter has chosen to put in many details to

make us feel the innocence and lovely grace of Mary's life; if he has shown us the quiet work with which she is busy; the sweet order of her room which images the tranquillity of her soul; this also is well. But the great thing is that he should perceive and show, as simply as possible, the charm of that perfect figure of maidenhood, no rude peasant girl, but one with royal blood in her veins and heavenly thoughts in her heart.

**The Nativity.**

2. The pictures of the Nativity have a greater variety of incidents and of modes of presentation. The simplest are those which show Mary and Joseph in the stable with the child; then come those in which the angels appear, or the shepherds came to pay their adoration; another conception represents the mother alone with her babe adoring him or nursing him. Pictures of the presentation in the temple, and perhaps some of the Madonna and Child, belong to the general theme of the Nativity because their central idea is the advent of Christ as a little babe.

Here the painters have found a wide field for imagination, and have used large liberty in expressing the feelings with which different persons drew near to the holy child. Mary is almost always shown as wondrously happy; sometimes, as in Murillo's "Adoration of the Shepherds," lifting the cloth that covers the child and displaying him with gentle pride.

3. With the Adoration of the Magi, a new element comes into the scene. These wise men from the east, whether they were kings or not, were the representatives of the outside world.

There are pictures which show the Magi on their journey led by a star, sometimes shining in the form of a babe in the sky; and others which show them at the court of Herod asking their way; and others which show them being warned by an angel in a dream not to go back to Jerusalem; and others which show them returning by sea to their own country. But the great majority of painters have chosen the moment at which the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh were presented to the child. Here there is room for splendid color and dramatic contrast.

4. The Flight into Egypt is the contrasting companion-piece to the Adoration of the Magi. The one brings the great world into the dwelling of the Child Jesus; the other carries the Child Jesus out into the great world.

**Story of the Flight.**

The pictures of this subject fall into two

main divisions: those which represent its actual journey and those which show the Holy Family resting, either by the way, or in the land of Egypt. The paintings which deal with the latter theme—commonly known as the Respose—include some of the most beautiful works of art, especially during the last three centuries. Many details have been introduced from the legends of the flight, in which the apocryphal "History of the Nativity of Mary" is particularly rich. This is one of them: "The Holy Family rested by the road beneath a date palm and Mary desired to eat of the fruit; but it hung high above her head. Joseph, being weary, was not able to climb the tree. But the Child Jesus knew his mother's wish, and at his command the tree bent down its branches. Then he thrust his fingers into the sand, and a spring of water gushed forth. The next morning Jesus thanked the obedient tree, and promised that one of its branches should be carried by the angels and planted in Paradise."

**The Triumph of the Innocents.**

The landscape is half shadowed by night, but the moonbeams weave a filmy radiance over plain and the distant hills where the watch fires are growing red. In front marches Joseph, with his basket of tools on his back, a sturdy son of toil. The mother, a noble woman of Palestine, carries the child in her arms, happy and fearless. But who are these little children that run and float beside the travelers? They are the spirits of the murdered innocents of Bethlehem, set free to follow the infant Saviour, and knowing that through him they have entered by the gate of death into eternal joy. Three tiny ghosts in the rear have not yet felt his presence nor caught sight of him, and the pain and terror of mortality are heavy upon them. But the others are radiant and rejoicing as ransomed souls; and at their feet rolls the river of life, breaking into shimmering bubbles in which the glories of heaven are reflected. Joseph does not see the spirits. I doubt whether even Mary sees them clearly. But Jesus recognizes his former playmates with joy. He leans from his mother's arms to greet them, holding out a handful of wheat, the symbol of the bread of Heaven.

It is all mystical, visionary, unreal? Or is it a true picture to the eye of what faith beholds in the religion of Jesus? Surely if this gospel has any meaning it is the bringing of light and blessing to the suffering little ones of earth; a deeper compassion and a tenderer care for them, and the promises of a heaven full of happy children.



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**CONSTITUTIONAL OBJECTION.**

Mrs. Thrifty—Well, if you're thirsty 'll give you a glass of water to drink.

Weary Willy—I dare not touch water, mum. I've got an iron constitution and it might rust it.

**Why Joyner Left Home.**

"Are you ready to receive the obligations?" asked the most upright supreme hocus-pocus of the Order of Hoot Owls.

"I am," said the candidate, firmly.

"Then take a sip of this prussic acid, place your right hand in this pot of boiling lead, rest your left hand upon this revolving buzz-saw, close your eyes and repeat after me—"

Early next morning shreds of Joyner's clothing were found upon the bushes and trees all along the road to Pottsville, 30 miles distant, and at Scrabbletown, 69 miles away, he was reported still headed west.—Judge.

The juryman who toward the end of a very long trial wished to know what the terms "plaintiff" and "defendant" signified is not alone in his ignorance. A writer in the Philadelphia Press tells of a man whose coat had been stolen. He had charged a suspicious-looking individual with the theft.

"You say this man stole your coat?" said the magistrate. "Do I understand that you prefer charges against him?"

"Well, no, your honor," replied the plaintiff. "I prefer the coat, if it's all the same to you."—Youth's Companion.

**A Natural Cause.**

"I think," said the smart child, reflectively, "that Hungary must be the most human-like of all the nations."

"Why so, my child?" asked the fond papa.

"Because," the smart child answered, "it is governed by its Diet."

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