

The "Twelve Days of Christmas" was originally written to help Catholic children, in England, remember different articles of faith during the persecution by Protestant Monarchs. The "true love" represented God, and the gifts of the rest of the "Twelve Days of Christmas" represent something special.

The Shepherds

"It is cold tonight!" said the oldest shepherd. He pulled his ragged blanket about his shoulders.

The youngest shepherd had been out gathering sticks and twigs and thorn bushes.

"Shall I build a fire for us, Grandfather?" he asked. "See, I have gathered a good bundle of firewood."

"A fire would feel good!" shivered the middle-aged shepherd. "The wind in these hills is cruel tonight!"

The youngest shepherd worked for a long time with dry kindling and tinder. His hands were stiff with cold.

But finally he got a small fire started. "Ah!" Sighed the shepherds, holding their hands over the little flame.

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The sheep on the hillsides rested quietly, lying close together to keep each other warm.

"The stars are very bright tonight," said the middle-aged shepherd, looking up into the sky. "I don't know that I ever saw them so bright."

The other shepherds looked up, too.

The youngest one stopped blowing on his fire. He pointed.



The Christmas turkey first appeared on English tables in the 16th century, but didn't immediately replace the traditional fare of goose, beef or boar's head in the rich households.

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"There is one which is brighter and bigger than the others," he said. "See what strange, long beams it makes!"

"Those big bright stars in the sky make the earth seem colder," sighed the old shepherd. "My bones are old. This frosty weather makes them ache!"

"Wolves and wildcats like this winter weather," said the middle-aged shepherd. "They get very hungry. Their empty stomachs make them fierce and bold."

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The boy laid a thorn stick on his fire. "My fire will scare the animals away," he laughed. "Run away, wolves and wildcats, or your whiskers will get scorched!"

"It is a strange thing," said one of the shepherds after a while, "but the wild animals are quiet tonight. Not once have I heard a wolf howl."

"Nor have I heard that fierce wildcat scream," said another. "It has become very still!"

"So it has," said the third shepherd.

"Even the wind has died down."

The bearded old man nodded.

"There is a hushed feeling in the air, as if everything waited quietly."

"Even my fire burns in a quiet way," said the boy. "Thornwood usually pops and crackles. This burns like a candle in the temple!"

"The smoke has a sweet smell, too," said the oldest shepherd. "Something about this night makes me think of a story which I have heard all my life."

"Tell us that story, Grandfather," said the

boy in a soft voice.

The old man spoke in a low voice.

"All my life I have heard that a great king will come to the world some day. He will bring joy. He will help the poor and sad. He will set us free from the cruel kings who rule us now."

"The world would be happy to have a kind king instead of a cruel one like Herod," thought the boy. He looked about the frosty hillside.

Suddenly his eyes grew wide. He began to tremble.

"Grandfather! Uncle! Look. Look all around us. Do things look strange to you?"

The older shepherds looked. Their hearts beat faster.

A minute before, the world had looked cold and frosty. Now, suddenly it seemed to be springtime.

The frost had melted away, leaving soft green grass. The trees were filled with leaves and blossoms. The air was sweet with flower perfume. Bright birds sat on the trees and sang like little angels.

"It is a miracle!" whispered the shepherds. The boy looked up toward the sky. "How bright it is! Are the stars singing?"

A warm, glorious light shone all around the shepherds. It became brighter and brighter. The shepherds hid their faces on the ground because they were frightened.

Then a voice spoke to them out of the light. It was a sweet, strong voice like music.

"Fear not!" said the voice. "Look up!" The shepherds raised their heads. It seemed that the skies had opened. In the brightness stood a great, shining angel. He spoke again:

"Fear not! I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be for all people!

"Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord!"

"It has happened, then," murmured the old man. "Our promised king has come at last."

The angel said, "Here is the sign. You will find the baby wrapped in white linen strips and lying in a manger."

The heavens opened wider. Now there were more angels standing behind the messenger angel. They all sang, and the stars seemed to be singing, also.

"Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth!

Good will to men!"

The glorious song rang like great silver bells in the night. It was the most beautiful song ever heard on earth. The shepherds bowed their heads and listened while they trembled with joy.

Then the sky closed. The angels disappeared. Only one great star was left shining in the dark sky.

"Come," said the oldest shepherd in a firm voice. "Come; let us go to Bethlehem, the city of David."

"What of our sheep" asked the boy? His grandfather answered, "This is a holy night. The Lord will look after our sheep."

The shepherds set out toward Bethlehem. They were no longer tired or cold.

"The Lord visited us!" thought the boy.

"The angel of the Lord came to us-just three poor shepherds."

"He spoke of peace, and of good will," thought the middle-aged shepherd.

And the old man gave a prayer of thanks. "O Lord, I am so thankful that I have lived this long. I have seen the great promise come true!"

Ahead of them the big star shone steadily. It seemed to move ahead of them, guiding their way through the night.

And so the three shepherds came to the city of Bethlehem.

"See, the star is pointing down toward that stable behind the inn," the shepherds said to one another.

"Here is where we will find the new king," said the old man as they entered the stable.

It was quiet and dim in the stable. Only the starlight shone down on the inside.

"Is there a new baby here?" called the old man softly.

Then the shepherds noticed brightness in a corner of the barn. It seemed to shine around a man and a woman who were sitting on some hay.

"Is there a new baby here?" called the old shepherd again.

"Look in the manger," said Joseph softly.

In the manger was a little baby. He was wrapped all about in soft white linen. Only his head was uncovered.

"See how the light shines about him!" whispered the young shepherd. "He glows with a holy brightness."

"Ah! He looks like a little angel," said the middle-aged shepherd.

"He is indeed a holy child!" said the old shepherd. The three visitors knelt about the manger. A feeling of peace and happiness came over them.

"We have heard wonderful tidings," said the old man at last.

He told of the things that had happened. Mary and Joseph listened quietly.

At last the shepherds arose. "We want everybody to know about this," said the old man. "We are going out and tell this great news to everybody we see."

As he went out, the old shepherd spoke to Mary and Joseph. "The Lord bless you and keep you," he said.

The baby's parents answered, "And the Lord makes his face to shine upon you! The Lord gives you peace."

When they were gone Mary said:

"Give me my baby, Joseph. I want to hold him in my arms and sing to him."

The baby opened his eyes and looked at his mother. He smiled at her. Mary's heart was filled with love and joy.

"He smiled at me!" she cried. "He smiled like a little loving angel."

She held the baby close and sang to him, rocking him gently back and forth:

"Sleep my little Jesus! Sleep, my blessed baby!"