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1912

THE

NATIVITY

BUNKER



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THE NATIVITY

By JOHN BUNKER

"

And behold, the star, which they had seen in the East, went before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was.

- *St. Matthew, Chapter 11.*

THE SHAKESPEARE PRESS
114-116 E. 28th Street
New York
1912

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By JOHN BUNKER.

Hushed were the courts of Heav'n; the stars were
still;
And all the angelic choirs—tier o'er tier,
Seated upon their dazzling thrones of light—
With solemn mien and deep submissive awe
Unhanded their mute instruments. No strains,
Whether of soothing lyre, exultant horn,
Or that more grateful tribute, vocal song,
Rose to the Father from that serried host
Of wing'd immortals, as upon their ranks
Like some vast shadow of an unseen hand
Fell dread expectance and portentous calm.
Most hushed and still those heavenly spirits were,
So hushed and still they seemed like shapes of
stone,

Lifeless and cold, save that their lustrous eyes,
Now pensive sad, now wide with dawning hope,
Imaged the restless footing of their thought
And so approved them vital. Like a mist,
Like a great mist uprisen from the sea
That creeping softly shoreward unperceived
Blanks the boon face of nature;—so by stealth
Thro' all the courts celestial and bright halls
Drifted a subtile silence, from the verge
And farthest reach of Heaven's wide demesne
Unto her utmost pinnacle of glory.

Sudden athwart those walls of solid light
Strange splendor flasht, as swift from th' Eternal
Throne
Sped onward to its high appointed place
The youngest star of Heaven. Wonder smote
For one brief moment all that heavenly throng,

And back they shrank affrighted. Then forth
brake

With murmurous joy and reverent posture meet
The cry of "Bethlehem." As when abrupt
Upon the virgin peace of loftiest Alp
Crashes the voice of thunder, rumbling on
From peak to peak, till the roused avalanche
Looses his roar majestic down the gale,
And hollow hills and icy caverns drear
Give back reverberate clamor;—so replied
With swelling cadence and puissant sound
Far tiers to tiers responsive; and uprose
Higher and ever higher from that host
Of sweet-voiced spirits harmony divine,
Celestial joy in thunderous acclaim,
Till shook the eternal battlements. They sang
"Be glory in the highest unto God,"
Glory supreme to Heaven's Eternal King,
Glory unending, worship paramount,

Praise in the highest, homage most exalt,
Full adoration to Omnipotent God,
With varied iteration, rhythmic change;
And with that mighty symphony were blent
In mellow chime and sweetest unison
From airy pipes and subtly stricken lyres
Spiritual musics, immaterial strains,
Fit for supernal ear. Meet while they sang
“Be glory in the highest unto God,”
Glory supreme to Heav’n’s Eternal King,
Glory mending, worship paramount,
Praise in the highest, homage most exalt,
Full adoration to Omnipotent God.
Then slowly, slowly, their pure voices fell
With delicate gradation, sweet decline,
To fainter tones and fainter, till at close
Trailing far strains of silver melody
Adown the tremulous spaces of the sky
They ceased so soft that like to blending hues

Of rainbow mirrored in breeze-wimpled lake
Silence and they did merge insensibly.

Full in that murmurous hush, while yet did echo
The fitful sighings of aerial sound
Drifting in billowy flight from distant caverns
And dim recesses of the antred air,
High in his place of primacy uprose
Splendent before those luminous tiers of song
Their leader, and in thrilling accents called
From out their midst his sweetest choristers.
Brightest of all those bright they forward moved,
Majestic, sovereign, free. No peer they had
From bourne to boarne of Heav'n, whether to
sweep
With mastering touch the golden-stringèd lyre,
Or sing high hymns of praise before the Throne.
Roseal lightnings played about their brows;
Their eyes were starry, and their snowy forms,

Flushed of young beauty and celestial strength,
Shone with bedazzling splendor. Odorous sweet,
Most odorous sweet, like flowers in some fair garden,

Those gracious spirits were, for thro' them
breathed

Essential purity and immortal love.

Forward did those tall angels now advance
With tread deliberate thro' the choral ranks
Unto the portal of the fane of song;

And as they passed, from the melodious host
Of heavenly lyrists, wingèd choristers,
Rose mingled benediction and farewell.

Unto the portal of the fane of song

Those sun-bright spirits came. Turning they
smiled

A tender smile of parting on the host,

And thro' the massy portal swift withdrew.

The faery time it was of Heaven's even,
Placid and still, whenas in purple folds
The shimmering veil of twilight wide is flung
O'er the celestial city. Rosily
Now glowed in rarest ether the high summits
Of pinnacle and tower, and afar
The swelling domes of stately temples shone
With golden glitter 'mid their forestry
Of slender spire and steeple, as apace
Did hasten thro' the darkling ways of Heaven
Those hierarchs of song. With burning speed
Thro' shadowy splendors and irradiant glooms
They forward pressed, and ever as they went
In mystic murmurs the ethereal ways
Echoed the rapid rhythm of their tread.
Fleetly they glided onward, past bright fanes
And glimmering courts and skiey terraces
And many a luminous mansion of the Blest,
Nor paused till on the crystal edge they stood

Of Heaven's ramparts. Wide extended lay
Before, below, around them the vast plains
Of darkened azure, lightless tracts of blue,
While dimly, vaguely, they could see far off,
(So far they seemed minutest specks of light
Lost in the vista of Eternity),
Full many a starry phalanx cleaving slow
In regular circumference and fixt curve
The cerulean disk. One only star
In sovereign state and single empery
High stationed in the vaulted dome of heaven
Moved not, but steadfast and unshaken ever
Amid the clanging tumult of the spheres
Still stood aloof in the bright solitude
Of his own grandeur. He had paced afar
With regal bearing and monarchal pride
The skiey regions, and upon his throne,
Inviolate and firm, of smouldering gold
And blazing sapphire builded, he now sate

Above the cloudy wrack of time and change
Kinglike serene. Those spirits knew him well;
He was of God, that glorious minister
Who late did speed thro' Heav'n. Upon his
 throne
Austerely calm with brow contemplative
He now reposed; yet even as they gazed,
Casting his robe of splendors from about him
That made to scatter the ethereal swarms
And shook with earnest might the arch'd heavens
He rose in towering majesty, and rearing
Upward his battalious arm did hurl with vigor,
With godlike vigor and resistless force,
His javelin of light. Down night's arcane
Thro' bickering shadows and the fraying hues
Of feverous planet and awe-troubled star,
'Mid spectral twilight and uncertain gloom,
It flasht in slope career until it smote

Full on the breast o' the earth. Therein it stuck
Quivering awhile, and then was fixt and still.

With thirsty gaze and vehement desire
Straining upon their leash of firm control
Those sun-bright spirits viewed that mystic
 signal,

And with one impulse, stark upon the edge
Of Heaven's ramparts, palpitant and tense,
They stood erect in glory. Suddenly
(Each in the glowing cirque his presence made
Stretching to fullest scope his furlèd pinions)
From that prond station forth they swept amain
Into th' unglimpst profound. Towards that
 beam,

That blazing beacon of high mystery,
They bent their course, and with supremest effort
Thro' warring darkness and most ravenous
 glooms,

Across dim chaos and primeval voids,
O'er mountainous ruin and the blank crevasse,
Cloven of midnight and the stroke of doom,
They won their way. Thro' fearsome realms for-
lorn,
Past shadowy shapes of dream and ghastly
visions,
Which do inhabit all that misty waste
Betwixt the moon and nether side of Heaven,
Fled they on valorous wing tempestuously.
Over the broad swart fields of night they sped,
Beating the sombre void with mighty strokes,
Until they reached those level tracts serene
Smoothed by the constant stars' unwearied tread,
Where they might stay their flight and seek re-
pose.
Here on the downy couches of strown clouds
They soft reclined, or in the pools of dawn
And crystal streams ethereal laved their limbs

In mild disport. A happy while, tho' brief,
They paused in that calm region; then refreshed
They rose, and shaking from their wings bright
 moisture
Down thro' immeasurable space on winnowing
 plumes
Earthward they plunged. Most swiftly dropt they
 down,
And on the ample bosom of the dark
Scattered the rays that from the newest star
Fell on their waving pinions silverly.

Far leagues on leagues they sank, and sinking
 viewed
The thousand subtle wonders of the air,
Each in his native posture. They beheld
The prideful comet whisk his spangled tail
Across the heavens and the blanchèd moon,
Hoising his rondure over cloudy keep,

Dartle swift silver arrows. Once they glimpsed
A flaming planet at its orbit's tip
Stand steadfast, then—like some rich galleon,
Heavy with pearl, that on benighted seas
Puts forth from haven—turn with th' aerial tides
And stately-slow swing down a gorgèd channel,
Blind with eternal shadow. The frore breath
Of blastful Boreas full upon them blew
And pearled with dewy drops their undulous hair
Streaming behind. Anon they drifted slow
Thro' the warm splendor of that sultry star
Named of the Dog, or drave on slanted wing
Down the bright vista of the Milky Way,
Paven with light. They saw the sistered seven
Plaiting their loosened locks in starry folds
Of claspered loveliness, as past the claws
Of the enormous Bear, lying a-sprawl,
Seatheless they swerved oblique. Afar they viewed
Despite of swirling mists of vaporous gold

Orion and the famed fraternal two,
In life and death twin-sharers in one glory.
And other swarming wonders they observed
Of th' upper deeps, now waning or a-burst
With gorgeous glitterance, swimming full upon
 them,
Or fast receding down long avenues,
Vast, cavernous, and silent. Still they sank
On level vans thro' the clear atmosphere
For many a league of space before there swept
Into their ken the spinning ball o' the earth,
Swathed in alternate brightness and old gloom,
Making a sober twilight. They descried
Sudden the patient mountains lift their heads,
Mist-crowned and hoary, and the earth's scarred
 front
Take on the virgin vesture of the snow,
Masking her shame, and the unquiet bosom
Of boundless ocean heave with solemn swell.

Then down the sky in silver-plashing rush
Of urgent syllables from their glad throats
Poured their sweet tidings of supremest joy,
Their high supernal message, "Peace to men;"
And at that sound awoke along their trail
A splendor, as of sunburst after storm,
A far-flung arch of interlucient gold
And ribbèd clefts of purple. Near to earth,
And nearer still they drew, and saw the flocks
Lying in huddled slumber on the hills,
And the unsleeping shepherd standing nigh.
In blinding glory they pursued their way,
Outbreathing e'er their tidings of great joy,
And as they passed, the wakeful shepherd heard
Their jocund strains and started back adread,
Gladdened and awed by that rare minstrelsy.
Thus with expense of pure melodious breath
Winning them ease of their full-hearted joy
Onward they sped o'er countryside and town,

Palaces, temples, and gray citadels,
Wall-girdled cities, mighty wildernesses,
And the great silent desert, bare of life;
And all the night was loud with their sweet song
Of "Peace on earth to men." Sudden they paused
In middle flight, and drew on hovering wing
Close o'er a lowly hovel and were still
And bowed with reverent dread unutterable
As there they saw the Woman and the Child.

With bliss-constrained eye and shaken bosom
Tossed in the laboring surges of delight
Those sovereign spirits gazed till sight was dim
And ached their souls for joyance. Then abrupt,
In such sweet accents as to angels are,
They brake into that chaunt late sung in Heaven:
"Be glory in the highest unto God."
Showering their golden strains of blithesome
 sound

They circled slow in mazy gyres of light
Over that sacred spot and inly felt
The joy, the pang, the thrill, the recompense
Of song's delirious rapture. So sweet pain
Knew not the primal singer in the dawn
Of his young powers when from his spirit's
 pinions,
Shaking Auroral dews, his carol clear
Rose like the lark that fresh from grassy covert
Ranges the skies in wild-wood ecstasy.
With descant large and utterance divine
They sang supreme submission to the Child,
Glory unending, worship paramount,
Praise in the highest, homage most exalt,
Full adoration to the Infant King.
But while they showered thus their golden strains
Of blithesome sound and wheeled in mazy gyres
Above that sacred dwelling, awesome change
Stole o'er the gradual face of the high heavens,

And every star, which erst most brilliant was,
With lessening splendor and diminished might
Obscurely shone. As when before a storm
Upon a spacious forest silence falls,
And then upsprings a solitary gust,
A gentle breeze precursive of fierce winds
And rending tempest, and straightway the birds
Seek shelter, while the brawny limbs of oaks
Sway to a temperate music, and the leaves
Whisper in terror of the coming fray;
So thro' the sky a breath of portent passed
In gentle wise, and all the branching stars
That rumorous were of wonders and eclipse
Trembled expectant. Thereupon from Heaven
Sullen there came a multitudinous tramp
Of marching legions, a stupendous beat
Of countless footfalls keeping single time
In vast processional. Unseen of earth
And the angelic messengers of peace

Onward did sweep that throng of heavenly spirits,
Column on column, till their loud advance
Resounding down the corridors of night
With tread triumphant and victorious din
Made quake the skiey concave. Suddenly
Far off from the hid battlements of Heaven
Blared a lone trumpet. Then were cast to light
The flaming standards of ten thousand peers,
The leaders of that myriad multitude,
Moving in fixt battalion, phalanx firm,
And ample cohort, covering all the plain
Of highest Heav'n. In general advance
Swung onward those bright armies steadily
Until their foremost ranks attained the wall
Based on the verge of Heaven. There they stopt
And silent stood, down-looking to the earth
With museful eyes upon that scene of awe.

Thick-clustered on the ramparts of high Heaven
Stood the celestial armies, hushed and still,
Mute-stricken by the mystery of love.
Thoughtful and still each watching spirit was,
Thoughtful and still and rapt in reverent prayer,
Until he felt a pulse of mere delight
Make pleasant stir beneath his weight of awe
And flutter dove-like upward to his lips,
Seeking its utterance. Then that heavenly host
From sweet compulsion and imperious joy
Broke into song. As when th' embattled sea
Long held aloof the land by rigid dyke,
Chafing and lashing 'neath the scourge o' the
 storm,
With sudden wrath shatters the barrier-wall
And ranging where he lists with terrible show
Of complete pow'r urges his battering tides
Forward with thunder,—so from that great
 through

Of squadroned angels, wingèd choristers,
Burst the tremendous harmony. It fell
With noise magnific headlong down the sky,
“Be glory in the highest unto God,”
Torrential sound flooding the skiey regions
And wheeling earth. It overflowed the heavens
Thro’ all their bounds, and when infrequent pause
Of silence came, like wave on wave did follow
Peal, and again peal. The lofty towers
Of Heaven’s peers e’en from their tops of pearl
Shook to their rooted base empyreal,
And rocked the floor of Heaven. The bright
spheres
Trembled in bliss, and with responsive thrill
The pale stars flushed to glory. One only star
In sovereign state and single empery
High stationed in the vaulted dome of heaven
Moved not, but constant and unshaken ever
Amid the shattering music of the spheres

Still held his mystic shaft of splendor true,
Pavilioning with light that sacred dwelling
Where Mary was and God's begotten Son.

And then once more was silent highest Heaven;
The stars again were still; and all the host
Of pure angelic beings gazing down
With museful eyes from the celestial ramparts,
And those bright spirits, heralds of new dawn,
Who brought the tidings of exceeding joy,
Stilled their glad tumult, and the mountains
 bowed

Their hoary heads in reverence, and the sea,
His feverous fret abating, became calm;
But one most wretched spot of this wide world
(For on her lay the shadow of the rood) °
Hiding her 'neath the sable scarf of night
Grew sad and mourned, and thro' the lonely hills

Voicing her sorrow came the hollow winds,
And in the secret haunts of desolation
They wailed her grievous fault that was to be;
As Mary with sweet stealth and misty eyes
Bent softly down and kissed the sleeping Child.

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