**The night before Christmas**

[**Atle Hetland**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/atle-hetland)

December 22, 2022

I have borrowed the title of my article today from what is said to be the first and most famous Christmas poem, ‘It was the Night before Christmas’, with all the fairy tales that children like to believe, and adults like to tell and hear. The poem was first published in 1823 in America, and in 1837 it was attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, although disputed by another writer by the name of Henry Livingston Jr. To the audience it matters little who wrote it as everyone is rather concerned about to story itself, about St. Nicholas, or Father Christmas, as we also say. He came in his sleigh flying across the sky, pulled by eight tiny reindeer, descending into the chimney and the cozy room. He was all clad red with white fur, and he had a beard as white as the snow. Since it was cold, his nose and cheeks had become red, and his round belly shook when he laughed. On his back, he had a big bag full of toys, which he put into the stockings that hung all ready on the fireplace. The house was all quiet, the children in bed, and not even a mouse or a cat could be seen.

[Transgenders eligible for cash assistance under Benazir Kafalat Programme: Shazia Marri](https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2023/transgenders-eligible-for-cash-assistance-under-benazir-kafalat-programme-shazia-marri)

When Father Christmas’ work was all done, he went up through the chimney the way he had come, then into his sleigh and the reindeer took him into the sky to visit other homes with children who could hardly close their eyes in excitement for Christmas. But after some time they couldn’t stay awake and dozed off. The next morning, when mum woke them up, they ran down the stairs and found that the stockings were full of great gifts, and the house had a scent of warm chocolate, cookies, and freshly baked cakes. The day was more perfect than the children had even imagined. Mother and father sat smiling, letting the fairytale of Father Christmas prevail, no need to spoil anything, but the older children knew it all, but they couldn’t be sure because the next year the same thing happened again, and the years thereafter, till the children grew up and read the same poem to their children.

And then you may say that this story has little to do with the ‘real’ Christmas story and its religious aspects, namely the birth of Jesus/Issa in a stable in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago, with poor herdsmen awake, angels singing, and stars shining. But the Christmas poem I have told you contains a message of the ‘Christmas spirit’, indeed as children think of it, not replacing but coming in addition to the religious Christmas story, which is also a mystery.

[Bilawal grieves over loss of lives in Lasbela bus crash](https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2023/bilawal-grieves-over-loss-of-lives-in-lasbela-bus-crash)

Like all major religious feasts, Christmas is about family, friends, food, doing good to others, receiving and giving gifts, and all the fuss and excitement about it, for children and adults alike, but also prayer and attending religious services – and at least on the Christmas cards, there is white snow on the ground, a bleak sun on the sky and the days are short, making room for more fairytales and stories at the fireplace as the evening gets gloomy and dark.

There is another famous literary story that I would like to mention, a sad and more real story than that in the above poem, notably H.C. Anderson’s story entitled ‘The Little Match Girl’, published in 1847, depicting the life of a poor girl selling matches in a Danish city. That day long ago, she is not having success in her business, not having sold a single matchbox since morning. She cannot go home because she fears scolding by her father when returning home without a penny. Besides, their ramshackle house would be almost as bitterly cold as the winter weather outside, with sleet and snow falling on the ground.

[IESCO notifies power suspension programme](https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2023/iesco-notifies-power-suspension-programme)

People were busy and jolly, rushing to get their shopping done and get home as soon as they could, to sit in the warmth of the house, waiting for the roasted goose to be ready for dinner, with candles on the table and napkins. Alas, the little match girl had not had anything to eat since morning, and nothing to warm her bear blue and red feet. She had lost her makeshift shoes, the worn slippers that had belonged to her late mother, as she crossed the street in a hurry to escape being hit by a speeding horse and cart. Another poor boy was fast to pick up the slippers, running away with them, and shouting in his streetwise manner that he could make good use of them as a cot for his baby when that time would come.

The little match girl kept walking the streets and she peeped into the windows of the well-lit and cozy rooms of the rich and wealthy. She got tired and sat down in a corner where the wind was slightly less cold. She got the idea that she could warm herself by lighting a few matches, but each match only lasted a few brief moments, so she had to burn one more, and one more, till all the matches were gone, and then she dozed off. She dreamt about her kind mother and grandmother, the only ones in her life who had loved her. She saw them in her dreams in heaven, welcoming her to join them, with food, warm clothes, a Christmas tree, and all things even more marvellous than she had seen through the windows.

[Fawad's medical report sought amid fears of custodial torture](https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2023/fawad-s-medical-report-sought-amid-fears-of-custodial-torture)

As morning broke, and people passed by, on their way to church or lunch at a relative’s house, they saw the little match girl’s stiff and dead body. Some looked away, they pitied her, having sad demeanours on their faces, at least for a few moments, saying the poor little girls must have tried to worm herself into the little heap of burned-out matches. Yes, they felt sorry for her. Yet, none had done anything the day before to help the girl, being so busy with their own needs, thoughtless and selfish, lacking compassion and mercy for the poor little girl. This was a time in Denmark and the rest of the world when people lived in divided towns and cities, with many poor and a few rich. There was enough for all if they had shared, but, alas, the rich kept all the good things to themselves. The slightest suspicion of what beautiful things she had seen; no one even dreamed of the splendour in which, with her grandmother, she had entered onto the joys of the new year”.

[Hike in petrol prices: Transporters announce 10pc increase in intercity fares](https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2023/hike-in-petrol-prices-transporters-announce-10pc-increase-in-intercity-fares)

I believe we should let the mysteries inspire and inform us, either they are those light ones in the first poem in my article by Clement Clarke More about Father Christmas, or, more importantly, the realism and dreams in H.C. Andersen’s story. Behind the literary stories, we can find important aspects of the religious Christmas message in the Bible’s New Testament.

Jesus/Issa brought the new covenant between God and people, restoring and renewing it, as summarized in Matthew 22:37-40: “You shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Dear reader, May I wish you a Happy Christmas.