

father's arm and the soft voice fell to a whisper. "Mother said the other night when she told me stories before sleeping time that soon we should have a new, good king and—"

"Hush," cried her father, while he looked about him fearfully. No one was in sight. They heard no sound but the sheep cropping the short grass and the song of a lark high above them in a white cloud.

The child turned a flushed face toward him and eager dusky eyes.

"Tell me, father," she pleaded. "I will not speak of it to a soul, only to mother, perhaps."

"Everyone knows it. Why should it be hidden from a child the hope that is being nursed in every heart in Judea? The time is near—and our prophets speak true—when the kingdom of the Messiah is at hand."

"The Messiah!" whispered the little maid. "Yes, that was what mother called him. Who is the Messiah?"

"He is the new king who has been promised to the Jews; a king of our own people descended from the house of David, greater than David in battle and more glorious than Solomon in all his glory. The time is now ripe for his birth."

Leah's eyes lingered on Jerusalem as she turned her face toward home. In which of these magnificent palaces would their new king, the Messiah, be born? The child's heart throbbed with a strange hope. She had heard stories of the splendor of Solomon, she had listened on many a winter evening to her mother's tales of the good King David, she knew by heart his beautiful songs and now a greater than David was soon to become their king.

"Perhaps—some day—I shall see him," she whispered.

"See whom?" asked her father.

"The Messiah," she answered.

Some days later—Leah remembered that night to the last hour of her life—she was sleeping in her mother's arms when she waked to find her father bending over them. The early gray of the dawn stole in at a narrow window in the stone walls, but it was not the pale light of the early morning that shone on the shepherd's face. The sunshine of noon seemed to linger about his head. He knelt beside the bed and took the hand of the mother between his own. He began to speak in a voice which was low and strange.

"I have seen the glory of the King," he said.

Leah could hear the beating of her heart. The world was very still. There was no other sound except the chirp of waking birds.

"I did not return home last night," she heard her father say in that strange voice. "There are millions of people in Jerusalem and without its walls waiting for the taxing. We did not dare to leave our flocks on the hill unwatched. The darkness fell and the shepherds gathered close together for it had grown cold, very cold. We talked of the heavy taxes laid upon the people—of Herod's cruelty—of our promised king—of many things. It was safe there on the hilltop with the darkness shutting us in. One after another of the shepherds grew drowsy. Sleep did not touch me. I told the others to rest. I would watch till dawn. Soon they all slept—heavily. I sat silent in the darkness with my eyes turned to the shining stars. In my mind ran the promise of Micah, 'But thou Bethlehem Ephrata, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth.'"

"While I thought of all these things I saw suddenly the stars in heaven turn pale and the hilltop was illuminated by the glory of a great light. The sun, which hours before had sunk below the horizon, would have grown dim beside it. In its radiance I could see the far-away gold shimmer of the parapets about the temple. The shepherds had awaked we sought each other's hands in terror for we knew not what. There was no light in the heavens like unto this. At last our dazzled eyes discovered through the glory, the shape of an angel. The angel spoke. 'Fear not,' he

said, 'for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a saviour which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.'"

"When the angel ended his message we saw standing with him in the wonderful light a great multitude of the hosts that people heaven. Under the silent stars which shone dimly in the distant sky. They were singing a new song. Once before the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted together because he had created a world. Now they sang: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.' The shepherd paused and turned his face to the narrow window. A scarlet shaft of sunrise of that first Christmas morn at Bethlehem played across the sky.

"And then—" the question was a shivering whisper from the mother.

"And then," answered the shepherd,

"old Roboam was the first to speak, 'Let us now go on unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us.'"

"We came with haste to Bethlehem, each one pondering greatly in his own heart. We must find the new born babe cradled in a manger with no softer bed than the fodder of the cattle. The poorest mother in the humblest home of our little village could provide better for her babe than that."

"Let us search," said old Roboam, 'among the strangers at the village inn. I have heard they are sleeping everywhere tonight; even yesterday the travellers had filled it to overflowing.'"

"As we drew near the eastern gate, we saw the glimmer of a light. It shone from the cave which, as you know, is the stable of the inn. Crowded in the yard were mules and asses. The stable had been given as lodging to the strangers for whom there was no room in the crowded inn. We found the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Over it bent the fair young mother, Mary of Nazareth. Her face

shone with gladness. Joseph, the father, stood beside. He was a poor workingman, as lowly in circumstance as we shepherds are."

"But—the king!" whispered Leah.

"The babe in the manger is our promised king." The father's voice was low but triumphant. "He is our Messiah. Hath king ever been born into this world for whom the host of heaven sang?"

The dusky eyes of the little maid dwelt wonderingly upon her father's face. He was no longer a poor common shepherd with work-worn hands and a weather-beaten face, clad in a shepherd's coat. He was the herald of a king, a messenger sent from the angels to carry a greeting to earth from the heavenly host.

The light of the morning poured its radiance now through the narrow window—it made a brighter halo about the shepherd's face. The child held her breath to listen—her father's lips moved. She heard him murmuring again the song of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

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