

A Child Is Born

Joan Myers

Among the stories of Christmas that are related, there is one that is seldom remembered, perhaps because it is such a simple story of the shepherds who watched in the hills on one cold, celebrated December night. It is also a story of children—one of them a wonderful Child and the other a little shepherd named David.

At the foot of a gently-sloping hillside in Galilee on this cold, wintry evening, David cuddled a lamb close to him. Its long legs dangled helplessly over his lap, almost reaching down to his numb ankles, about which he had wrapped strips of cloth. The lamb's breath and David's mingled in a frosty cloud, and, seeing this, the boy held the lamb closer to him, warming himself by the heat from the soft wool. Close by he could hear the sheep still grazing and moving about, their sharp teeth tearing at the frozen grass blades. Though he felt very alone in the world of sheep and stars and sky, he knew that his father and his brothers could not be very far away—big men and rough they were, but their hands were kind. If he looked down into the wide valley he could see

the sleeping town nestling in the arms of the watchful hills about it. He had just closed his eyes, buried his face in the curly lamb's wool, and pushed back his desire to get up and run to find one of the other shepherds so that he might not feel quite so alone, when he heard a strange sound which seemed to come from the east, then from the west, then the north and south, until it completely surrounded the hills and the valley. An unearthly sound it was, as when an echo of something long-forgotten begins to stir deep within the self, awakening shimmering memories. David lifted his head and opened his eyes to behold a low star which seemed to have settled over Bethlehem town. As he watched the star grew larger and larger, and its rays spread over the skies and blotted out lesser constellations in the brilliance of its light. Suddenly the sound grew louder and sweeter and in the midst of the light stood angels—many angels, all singing with voices like none that David had ever heard. He dared not move and could not have had he wanted to, for he was afraid that movement would drive away this indescribable beauty. Soon the angels ceased their singing and a voice spoke.

David never remembered in later years exactly what the voice had said, but he knew that it spoke of peace, goodwill, and a Child that had been born in Bethlehem. Then the splendor faded from the skies and only the star was left as silent evidence of what had been; though the hills were still trembling from the sound, the earth was left silent under the spell that had been cast.

A lamb wailed. David did not move, nor did any of the other shepherds scattered over the hills surrounding the city, for no one could share that moment with another or would debase its magnificence with mortal words. So each sat with his sheep grazing about him and gazed far off or steadfastly at the star in vain hope of seeing again the heavenly vision.

When at last they began to seek one another to discuss the mystery of this occurrence, the shepherds knew that they must go into the valley to see the Child of whom the angels sang. And so it was that they set about to go into Bethlehem. Each shepherd had a gift which he was planning to give the Child. David's older brother Jacob was taking a new-born lamb, white as the star's now faint light, as were several of the other shepherds, David's father was giving his good brown cloak; another shepherd, John, his sturdy staff. Yet David could think of nothing as a gift for this Child. He had no lamb of his own, nor a staff, and his cloak was patched and torn. He thought of how beautiful the Child must be, this tiny new-

born babe, more helpless than any lamb, and wanted to give something that would befit such a Child. What was he, only a child himself, to give? He possessed only the ragged cloak, the tunic, and the white robe that his mother had made for him. Upon hearing his father call to him that the shepherds were leaving, he followed after with reluctant steps.

The milky-white light of the star shone upon the hillsides as brightly as a full moon. An occasional stone went glancing down the slope as a shepherd's foot dislodged it, but there was no other sound as they journeyed down the hill. David was thinking so intently of the Child that he did not notice when they passed the first scattered houses on the outskirts of the silent town and arrived at the place where the rays of the star came to rest. It was a crude stable, but so filled with light that it seemed as if it were morning. In the midst of the brilliance sat a beautiful woman with a quietly gentle face and an air of grace about her. And before her on the golden hay lay the Child. The shepherds knelt about the Child, and David knelt with them, almost hidden behind the bulky shepherd men. But he could see the Child and the radiance that filled the stable, and he could feel the warmth from the bodies of the cows and the oxen close by.

Each shepherd laid his gift before the Child. Jacob first set his lamb on its wobbly legs beside the mother; the two other shepherds who had brought lambs did the same. David's father laid his cloak on the straw; John, his staff upon the cloak. And they all knelt about the Child.

David was left standing alone. The mother met his eyes and smiled, and he, in an agony of embarrassment, felt tears sting behind his eyelids. Without thinking he pulled off his white robe and, falling to his knees, held it out to her pleadingly. A look of compassion spread across her face as she unhesitatingly reached for the cloth and wrapped the fleecy folds about the Child. Smiling understandingly at the boy, she leaned forward and held the Child toward David. The Child stretched out one hand. David dared not take the Child, but he held out one finger for the groping baby fingers to close upon. A strange thrill passed through him as he felt the grasp of this being, so small and yet so hallowed as to have angels announce his birth. He bent his head and the Child loosened his hold; his head still bent, David followed the shepherds out as they started on their way back to their flocks, and only looked back for one last glance at the beautiful Child.

The walk up the hills was a silent one. Every shepherd trod carefully, avoiding loose pebbles, and, when one chanced

to be dislodged, all strained their ears to hear it fall until the sound shivered away into silence. Even the sheep were strangely still, as if listening for something. Though the night was chill and the walk a long one, David did not feel the cold; nor did he feel the rough wool of his cloak as it scratched against his bare arms and legs. The warmth of the Child's presence and the warmth he had felt when he gave the robe to the Mother, who had wrapped it about the young one, still flooded his body. The night passed, and David sat under the stars wondering at what he had seen until the morning star faded into the rose-gold of dawn.

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Patience

She slammed the door and stood inside
 And every man was stunned,
 "I think I'd like a job," she said,
 "I wait quite well," she punned.
 The boss soon saw he'd struck pure gold
 And took a waitress-wife
 To take in tips for serving drinks
 And love him through his life.
 The days that passed were all as one—
 A fleeting numbing blur
 That set the slightest spot of light
 A fatalistic lure.
 A red-haired salesman came one May
 He drove a Ford sedan;
 His jokes provided laughs each noon—
 She liked his brawny tan.
 In June she packed a traveling bag
 And left the boss a hint—
 The lovers sought another town;
 The woman's heart was flint.
 The salesman's in the jailhouse now
 Because the husband came—
 The judge may keep him there awhile
 Or may cut short his fame.
 She owns the tavern clear of fee;
 Her lovers are well-fed—
 The public comes to dig for truth
 And stays to break her bread.

—Ina Marshall.