

# A CHRISTMAS CAROL

The Earth has grown old with its burden of care,  
But at Christmas it always is young;  
The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair,  
And its soul, full of music, breaks forth on the air  
When the song of the angels is sung.  
It is coming, old Earth, it is coming to-night!  
On the snowflakes which cover thy sod  
The feet of the Christ-child fall gentle and white,  
And the voice of the Christ-child tells out with delight  
That mankind are the children of God.  
On the sad and the lowly, the wretched and poor,  
That voice of the Christ-child shall fall,  
And to every blind wanderer open the door  
Of a hope that he dared not to dream of before,  
With a sunshine of welcome for all.  
The feet of the humblest may walk in the field  
Where the feet of the holiest have trod.  
This, this is the marvel to mortals revealed  
When the silvery trumpets to Christmas have pealed,  
That mankind are the children of God.  
—Phillips Brooks.

## THE STORY OF THE LAST SHEPHERD

The chance watcher of the path which wound up from the public well to intercept the main street of the little town would have seen, at the time we have in mind, two children, a boy and a girl. They might have been brother and sister, so much did they resemble one another. In fact they were cousins once removed, descendants of a common great-grandfather.

They carried on their shoulders small water-pots which dripped from full brims with sparkling drops. It would seem an unfair assignment to exact from such small children the task of drawing from the deep well, and carrying water for the families' needs; but these were the children of the poor, and where all must work, all must do some tasks which seem beyond their strength. Half way up the hill the girl took the pot from her shoulder and set it down.

"Judah," she said, "I feel tired. Mother isn't in a hurry. I'm going to rest a little."

The boy lifted his pot from its resting place, and set it carefully down by the side of that of his cousin. "I will rest, too," was his only remark. Divested of their loads they offer the stranger a better opportunity to look at them. And he is struck at once by the many marks of intelligence and strength of character which show in every feature. For, while these children were poor, their poverty had not stamped out the signs of native beauty and ability. They might be water-carriers, but they gave promise of a strength and grace which, if permitted, would have become the halls of kings. It was believed by their neighbors that in their veins flowed the blood of the ancient rulers of their country. But they were far from the throne. It was more a question of clothes sufficient for common needs than trappings for a coronation.

"Esther," said Judah, "I hope grandfather will tell us again that old story he has told so many times before. He hasn't told it to us since old Simeon died. What can we do to get him to tell it?"

And there by the wayside these two children laid their plans to get their aged grandsire to relate again "a twice-told tale."

"I think we had better be going. Judah. Mother will be wanting the water by this time. And anyhow she will worry, for you know the robbers have been making raids of late. We had better go." And they picked up their burdens, adjusted them carefully to their shoulders, and trudged on.

Before a house they paused a moment before parting.

"Don't forget to come over this evening, as you said, Judah!"

"I won't. And we will see if we can get grandfather to tell the story."

The girl went on down the street, while the boy turned into the court of his home. Putting down his load he began to explain to his mother why he was so long in coming, and what he and Esther had planned to do. When he had finished he asked: "Mother, do you think we can get grandfather to tell the story?"

"I don't know, my son. Since the death of his old friend he doesn't seem quite himself. But if he won't tell it, your father can. For we have all heard it so often that we know all its features."

"Yes, I know, mother, but that isn't like having grandfather tell it. I think I could tell it myself. But Esther and I want to get him to tell it just as he saw it when he was a lad."

The mother looked her appreciation of the child's desire, and said: "I will help you to get him to tell it again, if we can. To-night is the anniversary, as you know. And I remember how, when we were children, we always wanted to get him to tell what the shepherds saw. He told it better than any other man of the company. I think Esther's mother will help, too."

In the meantime the boy's companion had gone to her home. Entering the court with light step she came upon an old man who was sleeping in a warm spot by the wall. Her mother was busy about the duties of the household, and didn't notice her approach. She was just turning to go to the gate to look for her child when she caught the sound of her feet in the court.

"Esther, you frightened me by being so long gone after the water."

"There was no danger, mother. Judah and I just rested a little while by the wayside."



THE GOOD SHEPHERD  
PAINTED BY PLOCKHORST

The answer quieted the mother's fear.

In time the pressing work was done, and it was Esther's opportunity.

"Mother," she began, "Judah and I were wishing that we might be allowed to gather in the village children of the village would be too that story about the night he watched the sheep. This is the same day of the year, Judah says. And we want to have him tell us about what the shepherds saw."

"Your grandfather hasn't been quite himself for some time, my dear. I am afraid that all the children of the village would be too much noise. And then I don't know how we can get him to tell the story."

"Let me ask him, mother?"

"Very well. See what he says."

By this time the grandsire was awake. The little granddaughter moved over to his side and laid her hand trustingly in that of the old man.

"The dear child," he muttered. "How much she looks like Esther."

"I am Esther, grandfather," she replied.

"Esther!" And he put back the curly hair from her broad forehead, and looked long at her face. Shaking his head he added, "No, no, I remember now. We laid Esther to rest by her baby's side years ago, out near where Jacob buried Rachel. You are little Esther, but not my Esther."

"Let me be your Esther, won't you, grandfather?" And the little head found its way to the old man's heart.

"There, there, dear. Get my staff. I must have been dreaming when you came to me. Of course you are my Esther."

The child brought him his staff. It was a shepherd's crook. It had been his conceit to always use the rod he had carried with him when he was strong and able to watch the sheep. Taking it in his right hand, and placing his other hand upon the shoulder of the child, he rose and moved with tottering step to a bench which promised a little more warmth.

When he was comfortable Esther began:

"Grandfather, Judah and I were talking awhile ago about you. We wondered if you wouldn't like to tell the village children your story this evening."

"My story!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, your story, that story you used to tell mother and Aunt Rachel when they were children. You know which story I mean."

"Yes, I know what you mean. Haven't I ever told it to you?"

"Oh, yes, grandfather; but not for a good while. And to-night is the night when it occurred, only long ago."

"To-night? Oh, is it? I had forgotten. Since Simeon—" The old man's

eyes filled, and his voice failed. The child knew what he wanted to say.

"Will we tell the children to come this evening?"

"Yes, I will try to tell it. This may be the last time I can hear witness to the things I saw. You may bring the children."

The child went skipping from him. Turning at the gate of the court she saw that the old man had gripped his staff with both hands, and had laid his head upon his outstretched arms. "He is thinking of the story," she said, and went skipping on.

He was thinking of the story; thinking of that wonderful experience which had been his years and years before. Other men had shared with him in that strange event. But he was the last of the group. Being the youngest of the company he had lived to see the last companion carried to the tomb. That was Simeon, the son of Benjamin, who had laid down with him that night as they watched the sheep. When he knew that his old friend and companion was dead it had broken his spirit. "It will kill Grandfather Joseph," the neighbors said. And it looked as if it might.

Long after Esther had gone to tell Judah, and summon the children of the village, he sat as she had seen him, with his head upon his arms, his hands upon the staff. Once, as the busy woman glanced at him, she saw him lean back and take the staff to his lips. He let it stay there long enough to give it a caressing kiss. He wasn't worshipping it; that the woman knew; but she also knew that he regarded that staff as his most precious treasure. For it had been in his hand as he walked into the village on that famous night of his story. And it was said that the tiny fingers of a little baby had been put around its crook. It was where those baby fingers may have rested that his lips touched.

When he took it away he turned to her and said: "Miriam, Esther and Judah are going to bring in the village children. I am to try to tell them the story of the plains. I expect this will be the last time I will ever tell it. And, if so, it will be the last time it will be told by any who knew. For all who were with me that night have gone to be with the Shepherd of our souls. I want to tell the story again, and to the children, that they may tell to succeeding children the things we shepherds of Bethlehem heard and saw."

His granddaughter was pleased with the speech, for it showed that he was stronger in body and mind than they had thought. Then, she too wanted to hear from his lips once more just what had occurred that night, now almost seventy-five years ago. The world had been big with events in that time. The country's capital had fallen, and the hope of becoming the world's nation was for the time crushed. The ancient people were being scattered all over

the earth. But there was nothing which so filled up the lives of these humble folks of the village as the great event which had taken place in their little town three-quarters of a century ago. All the actors in that memorable scene were dead save this old man. The chief Personage in the event had died a cruel death nearly a half century before. But the woman knew that He was not dead, but risen and glorified. But that was the chief event in the history of the city of the great King. The story she and her fellow villagers most loved to hear had to do with the beautiful event of their own humble town.

It wasn't long before she was stopped in her musing by the sound of children in the street. Esther was coming back, and Judah was with her; and a score or more of the boys and girls of their acquaintance were at their heels. Behind them came a straggling company of older people who, though not invited, yet felt that they must hear again the story which had been told them when they were children. For the story which was promised the young folks was one which never grew old.

The children came crowding into the court. The older people stood without the gate, but where they could hear, they hoped.

"Here we are, grandfather," said Judah; "and Esther said that you wanted us to come; for you wanted to tell again what you saw."

"My dear boy, the blessing of the God of your fathers be upon you, and upon all the children of Bethlehem, and upon all children in all places of His vast dominion. May you be blessed, and be a blessing."

The children stood with bowed heads as they received this benediction. While it was a new feature in the telling of the story they gladly received it; for in some way their hearts understood that this aged man was doing them a favor which they could not measure. There was a silence in the court and around the gate after he had spoken.

The old man took the shepherd's staff in his hands and set it before him. His eyes rested for a moment upon the place which he had kissed awhile before. Then, turning to the group of children, he said:

"Won't you sing for me? Sing before I speak. Sing 'the angels' song.'"

The children understood. In that company there was but one song in all the world's music so named. And their sweet young voices sang in unison that song which had dropped from the skies in the long ago, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men."

The old man listened until the last note had died into silence. Then he said, "Let us now go and see this thing that is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

He was beginning the story by using almost the identical words he had employed in that memorable night. For it was he, the youngest of the shepherd group, who had taken the messengers at their word, and proposed the journey to the place where they saw the sight of the ages. As he gave utterance to his own words, there was a movement in the group of children, and also in the company of adults which pressed towards the gate. Something in the manner, in the tone, had thrilled them. They must not lose a word.

After he had spoken these words he was silent again.

"Children," at last he began, "I don't know just how to make it seem to you. And that is what I want to do." And then he seemed to cast around again for a form into which to mould his thoughts.

"You have all heard me tell this story more than once," he began again. "I believe that its power lies not in the manner, but in the spirit, in which it is told. May He help His old servant to tell it with His power."

He leaned upon his staff as in prayer. And all waited to hear the gracious words which they believed would proceed from his mouth.

In time he continued, "My father and I were two of a company of shepherds who had brought our sheep from the more distant pastures to feed near at home. We had changed our feeding grounds to these hills that year for one reason. The Emperor had issued a decree that we were all to be taxed; and we were to be enrolled at our ancestral lots. But for that we would have been farther afield, just as the shepherds of the village are now. We were pasturing our flocks just a short distance out of the town. The event I am telling you about took place at night. Our sheep were all sleeping. The dogs were on the watch; and all of us but father—I was his turn to watch at that hour—were getting what rest we could. Simeon and I were sleeping in the shade of a great stone. I remember that rock well. I have gone to it many times since. As I said, we were all asleep but father. All at once we seemed to start out of our sleep. You know sometimes sleeping shepherds seem to be told of danger to their flocks. But there was no danger. The sheep were all resting quietly on the hillside, and the dogs were going their rounds. But father—I shall never forget father. A person stood by him."

"I thought at first that it was the master of the sheep. But I couldn't make out how he would be there at that time. The last we had heard of him he was in the city. But we weren't left long in doubt. 'The glory of the Lord shone round about us. Father seemed enveloped in it.'

A hush of awe had fallen upon the

listening group. Only Judah dared break the silence.

"Grandfather," the boy said, "how you feel? How did it seem to be with God?"

"My boy," replied the old man, "we were all very much afraid. Not that any of us had done anything to be sorry for; but, O, my dear children, who can stand before the brightness of God's glory?"

"I didn't tell you that before we went to sleep we had been talking about the 'expectations of Israel.' You know that the devout people of our nation were looking for the fulfillment of prophecy. And every shepherd who watched that night shared that expectation. We had gone to sleep with our heads pillowed upon the sure promises of God. But for all that we were sore afraid."

And even as he said it there came over the old man's face a soft, sweet expression. His eyes turned again to the spot where the neighbors said the baby fingers had touched his shepherd crook. When he continued he said, "But we ought not to have feared. We ought to have known that no evil could befall those who trust in the God of Jacob. And to quiet our fears by showing how foolish they were the angel said to us: 'Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people!'"

"None of us interrupted him; but we all pressed a little closer to hear what he might say. Such a voice as was his. Oh, my children, I wish I could deliver his words in the tones and accents he used. But I can't. This poor old stammering tongue of mine can't speak as the tongue of an angel."

"As we pressed closer he said, 'There is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.'

"Boys and girls, tell me where is 'the city of David?' " But the feeling under which they labored was too great for any to answer. It was Esther's mother who replied, "Bethlehem."

"Yes, Bethlehem," continued the old man, "our own dear little town, which had been mentioned by the blessed prophets, was the place he meant. And he said, 'There is born to you, this day, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.'

"And he went on, I think without any of us asking him any question, to tell us how we would find the Saviour King. For you know there were a great many strangers in the town at that time. He said, 'This is the sign to you: Ye shall find a new born babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'

"We hadn't time to wonder at the strange story, or the unusual sign, before that messenger of God was surrounded by a multitude of heavenly hosts. They seemed to come from everywhere. Simeon and I used often to ask ourselves how many there might have been; but could never satisfy our minds. They were a multitude, and they were singing 'the angels' song.'"

"Singing the angels' song," Esther said, with a trembling voice.

"Yes, singing 'Gloria in excelsis deo,' that dear sweet hymn which we hear little ones, I think, repeat to hear such singing, and then praising God before the throne. And that may be soon."

"Grandfather, did you go to find the baby?" asked Judah.

Bless that dear lad. I nearly forgot. Yes, we went and found Him just as the angel said. There was no room in the inn, and strangers arriving late had to find such shelter as they could."

"But for that," said a boy, "the room where I sleep might have been the place where the Babe was born."

"But for that," said another lad, "our stable would not have furnished the cradle for the King."

The old man laid a hand on either head and said, "My boys, it really doesn't make much difference whether it was in your inn," and he pressed the lad who had spoken first, "or in your manger," and he brushed the curl of the second little fellow. "Is He born here?" and he touched each little breast.

"But to my story, for I am growing tired. We went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, the two strangers who had come to be taxed. We found more. And it was this which compelled our adoration. For, we found the Babe lying in the manger."

"Was that all, grandfather?" asked Esther.

"That was all, dear child. We found Him; wasn't that enough? Heaven had given to man a Savior. And we shepherds were the first to be told of Him, and were the first to seek Him out."

"Did you put your shepherd's crook in his hand? That story is told of you," said Esther's mother. "His hand held the scepter of the universe, my dear," was his evasive reply.

The children knew that the story was ended, for the shepherd had never told it in any other way. They were turning to go out when he called them back.

"Children, I feel so tired. I don't think I shall ever tell the story again. I want you to remember it, and when you tell it to tell it just as I have told it to you."

Esther went up to him and said, "Grandfather, let me lead you to your bed."

"He tried to rise, but sank."

"I am too tired now, dear child. I will rest here a little while."

He put his hands upon his staff, and laid his head upon his arms in his favorite attitude.

Then the children heard him saying, "Oh, such music; such singing. 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace.'"

They thought he was referring to the song of the night of long ago. But Esther's mother saw his hands tremble.

Then he lifted his head and sank back. On his face was a look of indescribable joy. His old thin arms were outstretched. His shepherd's staff slipped down along his left arm until it rested against his face. The woman said afterwards, "But Esther's mother saw his hands tremble."

(Continued on page 3, Col. 3.)