

No Room For Him

AT ONE TIME in the past—and only yesterday in the reckoning of God—a devoted husband came to his wife and told her that, according to the decree of the tyrant who occupied their country, they must both go to the city of the origin of their families to be registered in a world-wide census. The young wife, who was hardly past the age of 14, heard this with dismay. She was about to have a child, she who was hardly more than a child herself. Moreover, it was winter, stark and blossomless and bleak, the wintry hills blasted and lifeless, the ground hard and dry.

Her husband was a poor carpenter; their only means of transportation was a small ass. There would be no warm vehicle for her in the sleety rain and the harsh wind, no comfort, no money so that she could stop occasionally in a comfortable inn to rest and gather her strength and sit by the fire and eat good food. It would be a difficult journey of pain and misery and cold and hardship and anxiety. The young girl thought quietly of the child in her body, who was almost at term.

"I know," her husband told her, "but there is nothing we can do. We are an occupied and oppressed country, and we have to obey. Let us, then, dear wife, dress as warmly as we can and take as much food as we can carry and trust in God. Our donkey is strong, if small, and I am here to help you, and we must remember Him Who gave you this child. We can do all things in Him Who strengthens us."

He counted the few coins in his purse and sighed. Then he prayed, not for himself but for his wife, the young girl almost on the eve of her delivery. How would she be able to endure that terrible journey over mountains, over creaking bridges, over empty, crumbling stretches of land filled only with loneliness, where there was no fruit on the trees and where there was only an occasional well in the wilderness?

The little towns and villages they would pass on the way would, themselves, be so swollen with people on the same journey that it would be impossible to find shelter, especially for a young couple so poor. Innkeepers notoriously raised their prices on these occasions.

The anxious husband looked at the two or three blankets which his girl-wife had woven herself, and he sighed again. The land was full of caves; if they could find one unoccupied by wild beasts or cattle or other poor people like themselves, there they would have to spend the nights of the long journey, huddled and bone-weary and hungry, trying to keep a little fire alive in the wind and rain.

The young girl, Mary, was up long before dawn, though her slight body was heavy with child. Joseph, her husband, found the poor breakfast waiting for him. He stood with his wife and prayed in the tiny yellow candlelight—for the cold sun was not up yet—and he asked the protection of the God of his fathers for his wife. Then he and Mary ate their bread and cheese and drank a little of their wine, the grapes of which he had nurtured himself on the hot vines of summer. He saw, with thankfulness, that the wind had dropped and that there was no rain. But that meant it was very cold outside, beyond this

little fire. It meant, perhaps, that some snow would fall on the tops of the mountains. The valleys would be bleak and the roads muddy, and all the streams would be bounding from the long seasonal rains.

Mary laughed as her husband wrapped her in long yards of wool and bundled her in one of the blankets. Her shining hair was hidden; her serene and lovely face peered between folds of cloth, the face of a confident child. Her eyes glowed with blue sweetness on her husband. He looked at the sky with a countryman's shrewd conjecture. The very rounded tops of the long hills were just beginning to be haloed with sharp gold. At least, it would be a fair day, if chilly. He took up his sturdy staff, grasped the rope-bridle of the ass, and the carpenter and his girl-wife started on their long journey.

It was rough and lurchy going, and very slow.

To encourage them both, Mary would sing the ancient songs of their fathers, and Joseph would sing also, on a deeper and more sober note. "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!" they sang. "Praise your God, O Sion! For He has strengthened the bars of your gates, He has blessed your children within you!"

To Joseph, that song of David had a special meaning. Mary's face was lifted to the gold and green sky of the morning. She appeared exalted and remote, as if hearing voices Joseph could not hear. Joseph, with sudden courage, sang: "Happy he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord, his God!—The Lord sets captives free, the Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord raises up those that were bowed down—The Lord shall reign forever; your God, O Sion, through all generations. Alleluia!"

"May my mouth speak the praise of the Lord, and may all flesh bless his Holy name forever and ever!" Mary cried out in her returning song, as if she sang not only of this moment but for all eternity.

The man and the ass with its mysterious burden trudged along, stumbling sometimes, avoiding boulders that had fallen from the hills to the muddy path. It was so lonely, so abandoned, in this dreary winter land. If only, Joseph thought, this were the spring of the year, and not the winter! "The Lord is just in all His ways and holy in all His works!" sang Mary.

They spent their first night, as Joseph had feared, in some far, abandoned cave. The villages were bustling with travelers on the same journey, and from the sound of revelry Joseph could guess that wine flowed and that prices were high. He built a fire, and Mary warmed the slabs of cold meat they had brought and put the cold bread on hot stones. Her serenity and confidence were as strong as ever, though her child-face was pale and drawn. Joseph, as he lay on his thin blanket, which he had spread over the pebbly floor of the cave, prayed to his God, but he could not help thinking: "There is no room for us, anywhere. We are sheltered as the animals are sheltered." He began to have real anxiety about Bethlehem, where they must finally arrive to be registered in the census. Would there be room for Mary there, and himself?

Every inn would be full. He groaned before he slept. Mary was already asleep, a childlike shape in the faint glow of the fire.

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Travel with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and share their suffering and joy as the Son of God is born in a stable in this inspired retelling of the Christmas Story