

And It Came To Pass

...among merry celebrants
at a small town inn

By CLARK KINNAIRD

AND it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

IN THE year 749 by the Roman calendar, the world ruled by Augustus—that was most of the world known then to the Romans—extended from a vague, almost legendary, Cathay westward to a barbaric Britain. The popular conception of the world was a plane stretching from the Mediterranean to abysses beyond which all was darkness.

Actually, beyond the boundaries of the world of the Romans were many populous lands, one of them being what's now called America. The latter had been populated by migrants from across the sea who may have been Asiatics, Phoenicians, Egyptians, northern Europeans, or all four. Most of the people of America at that time were nomadic tribesmen not unlike the nomads of Palestine.

In the Roman year 749, Jews who dwelt in their homeland between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan waited hungrily and hopefully for a messiah. They had been promised one by the prophet Isaiah: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God." They wanted a national deliverer from the tyranny which bowed them down. The estimated 3,000,000 people of Judaea, Samaria and Galilee, which then comprised Palestine, were unhappy and rebellious under the rule of foreign pagans.

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem: To be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child.

There are many places in the map of Palestine the names of which be-

gin with Beth, because it was the most general word for house or habitation. Bethlehem meant house of bread. It was one of the oldest towns in Palestine. It was the home of Ruth; the Book of Ruth is a page from the domestic history of Bethlehem. David tended his sheep close by; Samuel came to Bethlehem to find the shepherd lad and anoint him as King of Israel.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

In the days of Augustus, Romans celebrated the Saturnalia, or festival of Saturn, in the seven days beginning December 17. During it, no public business could be transacted, the law courts were closed, and no malefactor could be punished. It was a time of licentious disorder. Probably Saturnalian celebrants filled the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Sheep were one of the most important possessions of the ancient Hebrews. Judaea had manufactures, fisheries and commerce, but most of its people earned their living from tillage of the soil and from their flocks. Immense numbers of sheep grazed in Palestine in Biblical times; there is a story of one group of shepherds whose flock consisted of 3,000-000 sheep and goats. Sheep and lambs provided most of the meat and wool, most of the clothes of the East.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them,



"There was no room for them at the inn"—A reverently realistic painting of the first Christmas by Henri Lerolle (1848-1929), a French artist best known for historical scenes and murals.

Fear not; 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: Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Jo-

seph, and the Babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child.

Because of what the shepherds made known, the world eventually began to calculate time from the birth of Jesus. But there was an error in transcribing 749 into Christian chronology, and the event about which Luke was to pen the greatest news story ever written was in 4 B.C., reckoned by today's calendar.

Luke was the nickname of Lucanus, a man of Antioch in Syria. He was a physician (and also reputedly, a painter of extraordinary skill) before he became a convert to Christianity and a companion of Paul. The story was inscribed by Luke in Greek, upon papyrus, as a letter to one Theophilus, another convert to Christian-

ity. The latter was, like Luke, a Gentile, and he appears to have been a Roman of high position and wealth. Nothing else is known of Theophilus except this: by inscribing this Gospel and the acts of the Apostle to him, Luke made Theophilus' name immortal.

There is little more that we know of Luke but we know this: he was a friend unto death. "I am all alone, save for Luke," Paul wrote shortly before he was put to death in Rome. Such devotion was to be expected of a Christian.

It is probable that Luke gained most of his knowledge of the Saviour, as he did his devoutness, from Paul, for there is no evidence Luke ever himself saw Jesus.

Luke could have had help from the earlier gospel of Matthew, who had left his job as tax collector at Capernaum to be one of Jesus' disciples,

and from what Mark had recorded. There were countless other narratives of Jesus current at the time Luke wrote. Still it appears that Luke was inspired most by what Paul told him and by the material he gathered himself. It is clear he wrote with consummate, unmatched art.

Paul himself was a great writer, as we know from The Epistles: First Thessalonians, Second Thessalonians, Galatians, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. His writings and his labors within a few years transformed Christianity from something known to a few into a world religion. Still Paul placed his emphasis upon the acts and teachings of Jesus. It remained for Luke, a man wonderfully inspired, to write the wondrous story of the First Christmas that excels all other Christmas stories ever told.

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