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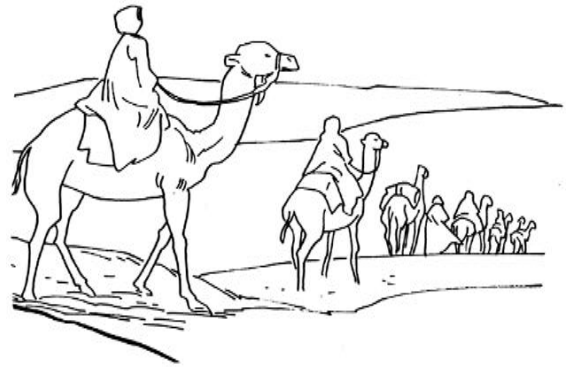
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## Sound In The Night

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the December 21, 1980 Sunday School Beacon

It was common knowledge that Bethlehem would be packed to overflowing this particular week. But I had no idea just how overflowingly-packed until I ambled nonchalantly down its cobblestone streets in the hazy dusk of early twilight. People, people; everywhere, people! And talk about noise! Laughter, too.



The atmosphere was one of gaiety . . . carefree unconcern, really . . . and for a very brief moment I found myself a captive of the spirit of frivolity and lightness, imbibing to its fullest this transitory opiate. So infectious was the delusion.

At length I fled of the clamor, the frivolity and the noise and wandered to the edge of the city where I stood thinking. That I didn't belong back there was all too obvious and evident to me. In fact, I felt out of place with my cousins, even, who had come with their parents -- my aunts and uncles -- for this notable, if despised, world-wide taxation. My home, too -- it wasn't the same. It had taken on a sort of festive, holiday air . . . sheep and goats were slaughtered and roasted to a golden-brown over an open fire; dainty breads and cakes were baked by mother and my sisters; palm branches were cut and brought inside where they decorated open windows and doors. Upstairs on the flat roof straw mats and pallets were laid out side by side, making a wall-to-wall bed.

It was too much for me; the raucous talk and laughter and the crowded conditions. This was not my kind of life! Like the sheep and the goats which I had herded since my

twelfth birthday, I too belonged to the hills. I was at peace and at rest in the solitude and the quietness of the open country. Furthermore, I learned many wonderful things while there. Things which father and mother were not a little concerned over, declaring emphatically that no seventeen year old boy need take the Law as seriously as I. But it was all there, on old Eli's Scroll, every word of what I told them each time I had a day off from herding the flock. Oh how wonderful the Words were!

Eli had found the piece of Scroll while herding his flocks high on the mountains, and each day thereafter my brothers and I gathered around the aged man to hear the "Thus saith the Lord." That the Words were the inspired work of the Almighty Himself, I had no doubt. Never, in all my years, had I been gripped around the heart and stirred by mere words like I was since having heard the reading from Eli's Scroll. I believed it all. Yes, all! This was the reason I so totally abhorred the lightness and the chaffiness and the sin which I knew was being committed in the city.

Night had by now drawn her deep-purple drapes and turned on her shimmering, glimmering galaxy-lights, making the heavens a dreamy, nebulous thing and the world a star-dusted wonder. Instinctively, I knew what I must do. Drawing the robe more securely around my slender frame, I headed for the hills, and my brothers and Eli. They would be surprised at my return so soon, no doubt, but I would again be where I was most happy . . . with the flock and Eli and his Scroll.

The beauty of the night, coupled with the quietude and the tranquillity of the hills, enfolded my being like a warm blanket. I inhaled and exhaled of the pure, fragrantly-clean smelling air, filling my lungs to capacity then letting it out in a great, explosive "poof." I felt happy. My cousins, I knew, would not miss me for long; there were dozens of others with whom they could associate . . . others, more to their liking. According to their thinking, I was "a peculiar young man," and "a 'serious' breed" . . . phrases which they whispered, and which I heard when they thought I was out of hearing. So I didn't feel badly about forsaking them; they would consider their stay in our home far more enjoyable without my frequent references to Eli's Scroll and its "Thou Shalts" and "Thou Shalt Nots," which were written specifically for our race, Eli told me.

From a distant hill I heard the soft song of a shepherd. The notes floated through the still night air with the clarity and the beauty of a crystal bell. That would be Justus, I knew, for no other had as clear a tenor nor as beautiful a tenor as he.

I walked toward the shepherd-singer. A visit with him would do my heart good. Like myself, he was still a youth. A brave youth, to be sure. Motherless at the age of ten, he took to herding the flock with his father, and in a short time Justus himself had taken over the flock, allowing the father more time to oversee the house and his teenage daughters.

I spoke softly as I neared the hill so as to keep the sheep calm and alert. Justus of my arrival. When finally I squared on the ground beside him, I said, "You should see our

city, Justus! People, people, and more people! Never have I seen the likes of it -- not even for one of our religious feasts and ceremonies!"

Justus sighed. "And you know what that means, Joseph -- sin. Much sin! I'm thankful to Jehovah-God for these hills; thankful, too, for the privilege of being a shepherd. But tell me, what's going on in Bethlehem? Why have all these people come?"

"Some sort of taxation, Mother said. Like you, I know very little of what's going on inside the city. And truthfully, Justus, I don't care to know. Not if it's anything like it was tonight -- when I left. I couldn't stand it. The spirit of it all swept me up in its frothy billows for a brief moment, I'll confess; but only for a moment, Joseph. Suddenly I couldn't stand the lightness and the . . . the chaffiness of it all; it made me sick. So I left and came out here. Have you seen Eli and my brothers?"

"Have !! O have !! Say, Joseph, you missed it; Eli read the most wonderful words of all today!"

Grabbing Justus roughly by his cloak, I begged, "Tell me the Words! Please, Justus! I must hear them. O why did I go home! Why!" Then in a soft tete-a-tete, I confided, "I care less and less about availing myself of my 'off' days and going home: Father chides me mercilessly about being too serious-minded, and taking Eli's words too much to heart. But I believe them, Justus. I do! Every Word!"

Justus toyed with his shepherd's staff momentarily and when he spoke his voice shook with emotion. "I, too, believe each and every Word, Joseph. All day my heart has cried out for our Messiah to come. Oh, those beautiful Word! Those beautiful Words!"

"Can you remember them, Justus?" I cried eagerly.

"Can I remember them! How could I ever forget them, Joseph! I memorized them -- word for word. All afternoon I have been learning them. Eli encouraged me to do so; he said I may want to pass them on to another who crossed my path."

"Then please tell them to me, Justus. I am eager to hear."

Justus crossed his legs and began speaking in his easy-to-listen-to voice:

"Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?"

"For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant; and as a root out of dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

"Stop! Stop, Justus," I cried hoarsely. "Of whom is the prophet writing? Did Eli say?"

In a voice that was little more than a hoarse whisper, Justus replied, "Eli said the words concern our Messiah, Joseph."

I bowed my head. Tears were washing my cheeks. "Our Messiah!" I exclaimed. "But . . . but Justus, my father said that when our Messiah comes, He will come in great glory and splendor . . ."

"According to the words Eli has been reading, we have been misled, Joseph. Listen to more; it is so beautiful, so filled with . . . with pathos and . . . and love:

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath hid on him the injury of us all.

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.' "

"But Justus," I said softly, interrupting again, "I . . . I thought . . ."

But my sentence was never finished: A sudden, bright light -- brighter by far than the sun at highnoon -- blinded me. Throwing my arms upward, I buried my face in the ample folds of the robe. Justus did likewise.

My legs, ever stout and strong, seemed like jelly; so fearful was the sight. And when I felt that surely my being could stand no more of this heavenly refulgence, a voice broke the stillness of the night:

"Fear not:" our heavenly guest proclaimed in no uncertain tone of voice, "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 Savior, 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."

My heart hammered inside my chest. A Savior! To us! To Justus and me! And to Eli and my brothers and . . . and . . .

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host! They were praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the higher, and on each peace, good will toward men."

By now Justus and I were on our feet -- praising God. This was glorious; it was wonderful; and it was real! No idle dreaming here -- a glorious reality. Heavenly guests had visited us, lowly though we were.

"Justus! Justus!" I exclaimed quickly, realizing that our heavenly visitors had taken their departure.

"They . . . they've gone . . ."

By now Justus had taken hold of my sleeve. "Come!" he urged excitedly. "Let us now go unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

"Yes. Yes!" I replied, setting my legs in motion.

"Justus. Justus," a voice called through the darkness. It was Eli and my brothers. They were running. Eli running!

"You . . . you saw and . . . and heard, too?" I asked.

"Yes, my child. I saw, and I heard. It is He -- our Messiah. Behold, He is here. 'And His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

"Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end."

In what seemed like a short time to me we were in Bethlehem. The din and the noise were still present though not as loudly as when I fled into the hills, and as I entered the lowly stable and saw the sweet-faced mother and her manger-cradled babe, I knew that the masses would never know that on this night was born a Savior -- Christ the Lord.

No, they would never know; they were too busy. But we had heard. Yes, we, the lowly shepherds, had heard the glorious sounds and voices in the night And we had believed.

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