

The
Shepherds'
Surprise!

A Christmas Story

BY

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KFAC—8:00 to 8:30 a. m. Week Days

6:45 to 7:30 p. m. Saturday Nights

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Sunday Morning 8:30 to 9:15

Country Church of Hollywood

5874 HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD

HOLLYWOOD, CALIF.

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

"And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them: and they were sore afraid.

"And the angel said unto them, 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 hosts 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 go now 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 Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

—LUKE 2:8-15.

The Shepherds' Surprise

A Christmas Story

By JOSIAH HOPKINS

MANY events that attract world-wide attention on this planet never create a ripple of interest beyond the stars. Things have come to pass on this little earth that have filled the sky with heavenly messengers and choristers and held the attention of the hierarchy of heaven. An Alexander, a Ceasar, a Charlemagne, or a Napoleon may strut in conquering glory across the battle-fields of this tiny sphere without recognizing the power or attracting a glance from the city surrounded by jasper walls. Boundaries of empires may move back and forth across a continent like the rise and fall of the tides without so much as being recorded in the book of Eternal Record. Yet, a babe asleep in an eastern manger draws angels out of glory and covers the Judean hills with a seraphic choir! Need we wonder that a few seers, loosed from earthly bondage by the upward tug of their

spirits, should yield to the magnetic power of this Cradle and come from the East to worship Him? The wonder is that all the teeming millions of this earth had not jammed Palestine to view the crowning miracle of the ages.

Someday we shall know how the Wise Men learned of the Lord's nativity. They said they had seen His star in the East. Did they mean that some flaming sun had left its celestial moorings to guide the seekers from the East to the Shrine of the Lord's birthplace? These are questions that must be left to speculation or until "we shall know as we are known." However, the Shepherds in this Christmas story were toilers like you and me, and the announcement of the birth of the Saviour came to them while they were at their humble tasks. Had only the Wise Men found the cradle of the Christ no man would dare to hope that he might know the One who lay in the manger that night unless he could lay a certificate of wisdom among the gifts that the Magi brought. Since these humble men of the hills were merely folks like us, we, too, may dare to start on the quest of the Christ at this holy season.

What must have been the amazement of those country men at the sudden appearance of angels on those commonplace hills! What consternation must have paralyzed their brains as the celestial choir startled the wild birds and the flocks with the first Christmas anthem! Never had this earth seen such a group of singers; never had human ears listened to such enrapturing melody. To think of the price of a ticket to such a concert sickens the human soul, and how cheap would all the wealth look in a hand of one who offered to buy heaven's music on the night our Lord was born! Yet, that celestial concert was given for only a few poor men of the fields. There were no reservations for the great of earth, and no box seats! That is God's method of giving always—all He has to the heart that will receive it.

The music died away as the last echo faded from the distant hills. The angels and the heavenly choir were gone. How barren the fields must have looked; how discordant must have been the sounds of the night. Oh, it's always the same; it's not where we are, but how much of God and heaven we have in our hearts.

There were the same old hills with the same old flocks and the same commonplace folk when the angels were gone. Have you ever known the desolation that follows the departure of the angels and the songs of praise out of your life? The earth becomes a barren desert—people seem so common, buildings so empty, and life so drear. How dull and drab does it all become.

This Christmas will find many lives as bleak as those hills in Palestine—when the heavenly visitors had departed. Love has taken wing, leaving only memories, or Death has drawn a curtain of sorrow between your little home and the sun. Now, there are left only the commonplace things of life; the joyousness of living is gone. Such an existence soon becomes unbearable unless the disconsolate hearts can go where the shepherds went when the angelic music faded from the Judean hills.

The story says, "And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us go now even unto Bethlehem—" Let us all make that Bethlehem Pilgrimage this

Christmas! Let us leave behind all the disappointments, the disillusionments, all the losses, all the emptiness, all the show and sham. Let us follow the path the shepherds trod and stop not until we see Him who lay so helpless in the cradle that night. Now we can find the same Christ they saw but how changed! He has risen from the Cradle to the Throne!

Yes, the angels went back into heaven! I wonder if they noticed the country—the hills, the brooks, the flowers, the flocks—the setting where the shepherds were! Surely, they did not. They were so engaged in the Nativity song of praise that scenes and circumstances meant nothing to them. Oh, that we could be so lost in the telling of the story of this Christ of Bethlehem that where we tell it, or to whom, and the surroundings that mark the scene, would pass out of our soul's vision!

I wonder what the heavenly visitors thought of the sheep-herders. Do you suppose it mattered who they were, or how they were dressed? Doubtless, they never had a thought of the audience that night, whether they were rich or poor, clad in rags or royal purple mattered nothing. It was the telling of the

story that counted. Nothing else could lay claim to a thought. If they noted the shepherds at all, it was to wonder at their fear of the heavenly light and music and their stolid indifference when heaven was all a-thrill with interest that the Divine had made personal contact with the earth.

How the words of the angelic host must have rung in the ears of the astounded shepherds: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord!" And yet the angel said that the identification of the babe would be the finding of Him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. What a paradox! A Saviour "which is Christ the Lord" and—"in the city of David"—yet lying in a manger wrapped in the robe of helpless infancy! Why, David wore a crown of fabulous value, lived in a gilded palace, and ruled with a scepter of all but resistless power! His Christ—the One who would sit on the throne as his successor—the Saviour of Israel and the world—living in a cradle in a manger! Surely the shepherds remembered only the glorious description of the Christ as they had heard it from the heavenly visitor's

lips and wondered as they hastened to Bethlehem how would the glory of the Lord be expressed about the infant Messiah.

Imagine their surprise to find the Lord of Heaven and earth lying in the courtyard of a common eastern inn! No heavenly choirs in attendance, and no angelic trumpeters announcing the birth of a King! Tiny baby hands lying helpless on an infant's bosom! An ordinary Hebrew woman nearby who had given birth to the Prince of Peace! Strange, isn't it, that heaven serenaded the humble shepherds, yet let Him, the Son of God, lie unheralded and helpless in the crowded yard of a manger! Doubtless, many sought the Christ in the billion dollar temple, others looked for Him at Herod's palace, but God laid the Lord of Life in a cattle yard. Surely, that was what the shepherds meant when they cried excitedly, "Let us see this thing which has come to pass"—angels for us and swaddling clothes for the Saviour of the World!

But it was true! The Shepherds found Him in an unexpected place. So, ever since, humanity has beheld Him doing unexpected things, uttering unexpected truths until one would

not be far afield to call Him the Lord of the unexpected! His parents found Him saying unexpected things to the doctors in the Temple. His reply to their question, "Son, why has thou thus dealt with us, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing," brought forth the unexpected answer, "I must be about my Father's business."

His baptism was unexpected. Instead of baptizing John as the forerunner of the Christ requested, Jesus Himself sought that rite at the hands of a man, saying, "Suffer it to be so to fulfill all prophecy."

He came down from the mount of temptation—not as any mere man would have come, but in the power of the Spirit, leaving behind Him a defeated foe.

His first miracle was in the realm of the unexpected; He turned water into wine without a recorded spoken word!

His messages startled men until they cried, "Man never spake like this man."

He unexpectedly forgave sin instead of condemning the sinner!

He met disease unexpectedly. Instead of

expressing sympathy for the sufferers, He swept the disease aside with a word, in one case curing blindness by placing a salve of mud and spittle upon the eyes that were sightless!

Instead of the burying the dead, He raised them to life!

He chose his apostles not from the Sanhedrin but from the fishing wharves and one from a hated tax collector's office—all from the common people!

He unexpectedly annulled the laws of gravitation and walked on water, bidding one of His disciples to do the same.

He came to an unexpected end; instead of ending His career on a throne, He died between two thieves on a cross!

He left the world in wide-mouthed astonishment as He unexpectedly arose from the grave!

Instead of soaring away to His power and glory in the Throne of Jehova, He lingered on earth unexpectedly for forty days to let His disciples examine the wounds in His hands and side!

He unexpectedly ascended from Olivet, ending the first phase of His earthly visit by going up instead of down as all kings had done before Him!

He left two men in white as a rear guard of comfort to announce that He would come back to this earth as He went away, and He Himself declared before His departure that his return would be unexpected!

What a Saviour! The Lord of the unexpected!

You will find Him today in unexpected places! Perhaps in some little mission where a wheezy organ tells the story of his Nativity! You will find Him making His home in the most unexpected bosoms through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

One day this week I bought an apple of an old lady down town. As her hand reached out from under the ragged shawl to deliver the apple and receive a coin, she smiled so sweetly and said, "My son, do you know the Christ who makes his home in my heart?" One would never suspect the King of Kings dwelling under such a ragged shawl, but I am sure He was there.

They had a tenement fire in a Southern city. When all hope of saving the children of a widow living in the attic was abandoned, a saloon keeper broke through the police, crying, "Those kids haven't got a chance; their mother is away at work." And with a look to heaven he shouted, "Pray for me and I'll try it."

He came out with one child wrapped in his own scorched coat, but the rescuer was fatally burned. Surely, in one exalted moment, this man of sordid life must have either yielded to the influence of the Christ who does such unexpected things or may have possibly felt His miraculously saving power.

In an eastern city there is a woman who is known as the "Angel of the Underworld." It was my privilege to be in a service with her one night down in the part of the great city where the doorways and alleys are clogged with human derelicts.

After one mid-night meeting some one asked the "angel" of this realm of hopeless men and women where she received her marvelous Bible-training and the inspiration that

had kept her tirelessly at this rescue work all these years. A worker volunteered:

"Let me guess, you are either a minister's widow, fired by the zeal of a departed mate, or you are the product of the finest possible Christian home."

The "angel" was silent a moment, then tearfully told the story of her life. She said that she had received no religious instruction in her childhood; that she came to this great metropolis looking for work; she walked the streets hungry and homeless until she sank into the cesspools of hopelessness. She later became the "moll" of a gangster; she bought and operated one of the worst dives in the shadows of the great city. But let me give you her words for the rest of the story:

"One night while a light snow was falling, I heard the sound of a guitar and two cracked voices in the street in front of my place. I opened the door to order the disturbers away and saw two elderly people, a man and a woman, standing in the snow. The old man was

playing the guitar, and both of them were singing—

*'Jesus paid it all;
All to him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain;
He washed it white as snow.'*

"For a moment I resented their presence, but I wondered why they were standing here in the snow and singing that song—here of all places. Then I thought the poor old folks ought to be home by the fireside. But I couldn't order them away! So I said to myself, 'If it helps them, let them do it.' Standing just outside the door I listened to another stanza.

*'Yea, now indeed I find,
Thy power and thine alone
Can cleanse the leper's spots,
And melt a heart of stone.'*

"I have no words to describe the feelings that flooded my mind! 'My 'God,' I whispered to myself, 'that's a picture of me—"leopard's spots" and "a heart of stone".'

Her voice dropped to a whisper as she went on:

"That's about all. I don't remember much

else. They told me later that I rushed out into the street and fell on my knees in the snow, crying: 'O, please let that power cleanse my leopard spots and melt my heart of stone.'

Her face grew stern, and her eyes flashed, and she said, "I never went back! I don't know what became of my clothes, furs, or jewelry. I have traveled straight forward ever since with my eyes on Him who changed my heart and took away the leopard spots that night."

O, wonder-working Christ! What miracles of grace are possible this Christmas! In one sense He has changed, for He is no longer in a Cradle, but He sits in His Father's throne among the controls of power, repeating over and over your name and mine and pleading with the stern justice of the Godhead his redemptive price paid that day on a hill just outside Jerusalem. His hands are not now those of a helpless infant, but divine hands that hold the scepter of universal sovereignty. Did He not say, "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth; go ye into all the world, and teach all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Ghost. And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”?

The scripture is also true, that He is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” In the light of that passage we must believe that even in the cradle He was still the Christ. His descent to the humble door of human birth in such commonplace surroundings is one of the great miracles of His eternal God-head. To me the other great miracles are: His miracle of love in putting on the sins of the human race like a garment and taking them to Calvary, for Isaiah says, (Chapter 53) “His soul was made a ransom for sin”; another climaxing miracle was His imparting new life to dead souls in His doctrine announced to Nicodemus (John 3) and in His actual new-creation of me and women down the centuries. The other wonderworking acts of His life are mere corollaries easily deduced when you accept His divinity—power over gravitation, the winds, and the sea; healing the sick and raising the dead; and His resurrection and ascension. Give me a divine Christ, and I will ex-

pect these latter manifestations of the miraculous.

Did you notice these words, “AND THEY CAME WITH HASTE”? After what the shepherds had seen, they could hardly go to any empty hills after the angels had announced the Nativity of the Lord. Could flocks of sheep hold them away from the Cradle of the Messiah? Could they lie down to sleep with the announcement of the angels burning in their brains? They did not do it, but how many folks since that night have heard the same story from inspired lips but chose to linger with the flocks or to lie down and dream of their own selfish plans. And to think that the Christ is nearer to us today than He was to shepherds that holy night! These men in Judea had to travel miles to reach the Babe of Bethlehem, but since the descent of the Holy Spirit our Lord has been at the portal of every hungry heart, saying:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man will hear my voice and open unto

me, I will come in and sup with him, and he with me."

Take the shepherd's trail this Christmas and go as they went—"with haste." And the Lord of the Unexpected will do things in your heart, your business, your home, as miraculously as He did on the night the angels sang of His birth. If He can compress Himself into a tiny baby's form, He can make His home in your heart! If He stooped to enter human life on the level of a cradle in a stable, He can find a way down to where you are at this moment. If wise men traveled across a continent to pay homage at His birth, how wise will be the act of your adoration after the years of His crowning miracles on this planet! If a host from heaven came down to earth to sing the "gloria excelsis" to a few shepherds, how gladly should all of us be telling the same story to a starved and panic-stricken world!