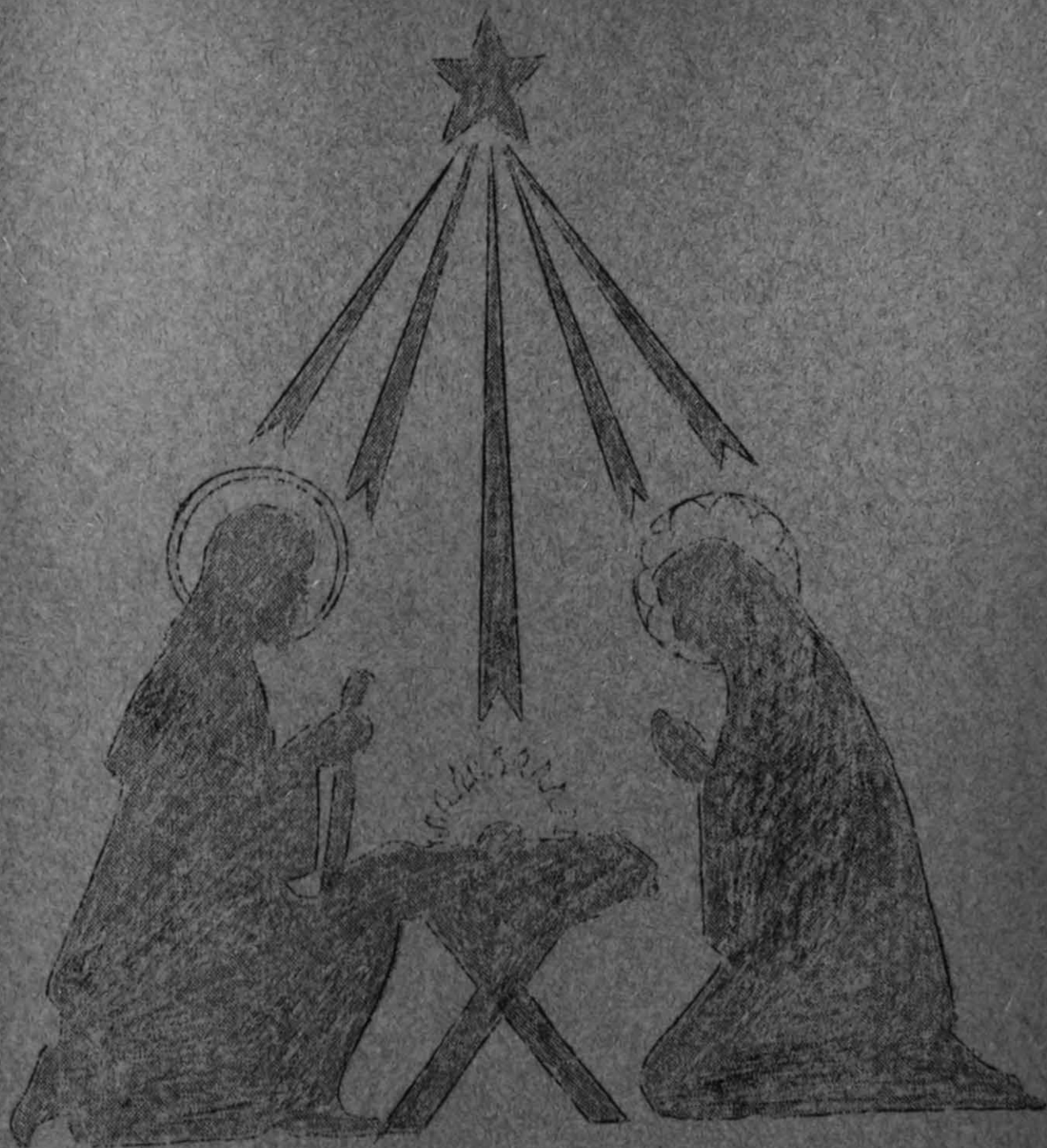


The people that walked in darkness have seen a great
light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death
upon them hath the light shined.

Isaiah 9: 2



THEY HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT

A Christmas Short Story

by

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The busy day had come to an end and the people had withdrawn to the shelter of their homes, leaving the little town of Bethlehem wrapped in the chilly hush of night. Here and there, a lingering merchant made his way homeward or a late traveller plodded his weary path along the quiet streets and vainly sought shelter in the town's small inn.

The innkeeper stood in his doorway listening in the quiet of the evening, and telling all those who asked that he had no more rooms. His inn was filled to capacity, and even though he would liked to have taken them in for the night, he was forced to turn them away. He was losing a lot of money that way, he thought greedily. But then he shrugged; he was making enough with all his rooms full.

The streets were deserted now, and there were no sounds to be heard. It was getting late and he shivered with the cold. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him, thankful that he was lucky enough to have some place to get in out of the night.

As the innkeeper warmed himself before the dying embers of the fire, another man lay shivering in the stable that stood behind the inn. But Reuben's shivering was not due entirely to the cold; it was also caused by fright and by pain. His right hand tightened its grasp on the dagger he held, while his other hand clutched at the blood-soaked spot on his jacket. The deep wound in his chest was paining terribly and he was weak from loss of blood, but he ground his teeth and promised himself that he wouldn't die without a fight. His breathing was slow and tense as he heard them searching for him in the stable; once, a couple of them came close to his hiding place behind the partition and he steeled himself to leap erect and meet them, but they passed by without seeing him. They drew farther and farther away until at last they gave up the search and filed out the door, and as their voices receded in the darkness, Reuben drew a long sigh of relief.

Then, following the first flood of relief at his narrow escape, there came the realization of the graveness of his predicament. Here he was, wounded, weak, unable to travel, without food or friends, and hunted by the entire countryside. It was nothing new to Reuben to be hunted by enemies and to be without food or friends. Indeed, he had never had any friends, nor scarcely any money or food except that which he stole. For forty years, ever since he had been a boy, he had been stealing practically everything he had ever had. He had been hunted before by his angry victims, but he had always managed to kill them before they could kill him, or, if there had been too many of them, he had cleverly slipped away in the darkness. The many years of practice had made him exceedingly cunning, and he had left behind him throughout all Judaea a long trail of victims, both living and dead.

But now, for the first time, he was at a loss to know what to do. He was wounded this time, seriously; he was weak and could not travel and it would take a long time for the wound to heal. And yet he could not stay where he was, for he knew that when daylight came his enemies would begin a more thorough search for him. What could he do? Where could he hide? Was he trapped, finally?

Then, abruptly, the panic left him and in its place was a burning anger and resentment toward the girl. He failed to realize that it had been his fault and not hers; after all, if she hadn't screamed his pursuers wouldn't have found him. What was her name? He struggled to remember but gave it up; it didn't matter anyway. She was beautiful and that was all that Reuben had had to know.

He had seen beautiful girls before - many beautiful ones that had fascinated him, but he had never met one like this one. No, women were nothing new to Reuben, but this one had been so different. That was why he had decided he must have her; after all, he thought he had successfully shaken off his pursuers and could afford to waste a little time. But she had fought like a cornered animal; Reuben gingerly felt the long gashes on his cheeks, gashes made by her fingernails. And then she had screamed, and that was what had brought his enemies down upon him again, all the angry, vengeful motley crew of peasants who were out to avenge the murder of one of their brothers that afternoon. And they had almost caught him, too. He had managed to get away in the deepening twilight, but not before one of them had given him this ugly wound.

Yes, it was all the girl's fault; if she had not screamed and brought them down on him, he would now be many miles from here, on his way to some distant city where he could safely make use of the bag full of money he had netted from his afternoon's work. But now, on account of her, he was trapped in this foul-smelling stable. What was he to do?

The coldness of the night floated in upon him through the cracks in the rude shelter, and he unrolled the blanket beside him and spread it over himself. It was a fine blanket; the owner had probably been very angry when he found it was missing. Reuben pulled it close around his shoulders and lay still. For a long time he was motionless, trying to think of some way out of his predicament.

Finally he sat up, rolled up his blanket again, and started to crawl toward the door. He felt somewhat stronger now and was desperately going to try to make his way a few miles away from this place. Now, while it was still dark, he might be able to elude his enemies.

He reached the door and started to stand up, then sank back again to his knees as the darkness seemed to swim around him in circles. He was not as strong as he had thought. But the realization only drove him to further efforts and he forced himself to stand erect in the open doorway, leaning against the wall for a moment to steady himself.

Then suddenly he lifted his head and listened. Had he heard voices? Instinct told him to run, but his legs refused to obey. Around the corner of the stable there came a group of people, one of them carrying a torch. No time to run now; frantically, he dove back into the stable and crawled a few feet from the door where he collapsed in a heap behind the partition. He could hear the people entering the door behind him, and his breath came in heaving gasps as he watched them through a knot-hole in the partition.

His first thought had been that it was some of his enemies coming back for another search with a light, but his mind was quickly put at ease on that account. One of the men he recognized as the keeper of the nearby inn whom he had seen earlier in the evening as he had made his stumbling way into the stable. The other man was a traveller, a peasant judging from his clothing, and with him was a woman, probably his wife. The woman appeared to be sick, for her husband had his arm around her and was helping her to walk. He led her toward a pile of straw and helped her to lie down, and then her eyes closed and she moaned slightly in pain.

"It won't be very warm here, but it's the best I can do for you," said the innkeeper briefly as he gave the light to the other man and turned to go. "Others have spent the night here, and you might possibly find that they have left a blanket somewhere around."

The man took the light and muttered his thanks, and then turned to his wife. Reuben watched the innkeeper leave and then relaxed on the straw with a sigh. The man and the woman. Could he get to the door and slip out without being noticed? Carefully, he measured the distance, and was startled to see that the door appeared to be gently revolving a few feet before his eyes. Then the whole building seemed to take up the motion; a dull buzzing sounded in his ears, and he fell limply back on the straw as a wave of darkness swept over him.

For long he laid there he would never have been able to tell. At first, there was nothing; then, gradually, he thought he began to dream. He seemed to be somewhere where there were many people; there was a hum of voices and through it there persistently cut the wail of a baby. The voices and the sounds rose in volume but the wail continued; then everything else except that died away to a low murmur.

Reuben shook his head and put his hands to his ears in protest. Then he opened his eyes and realized where he was. In a brief instant he remembered everything, the man, the woman, and -- the wail of the baby still persisted. Fumbling in the semi-darkness, he made his way to the knot-hole again and peered through. The woman was still lying on the bed of straw; beside her sat the man, numbly staring at the wall in front of him; and near them, in one of the mangers, lay a tiny baby.

Reuben looked at them for a long time, particularly at the baby, and then sank back again on the straw. What was he going to do? He tried to cover his ears and drown out the disturbing wails of the baby that he might think more clearly. He was not able to travel; he had convinced himself of that now. Merely going to the door and back had caused him to faint; he would have to stay where he was.

But the baby. Before, he had supposed that the man and the woman would leave in a few hours, but now this -- there was no telling how long they would stay here, and he would have to lie quiet all that time. Then, suddenly, he felt like laughing. How stupid he had been! This was just what he needed. If his enemies came back in the morning to look for him again and found the man and woman and a new-born baby they certainly wouldn't disturb them by searching for him. The presence

of the others would convince them that he wasn't here.

The baby was quiet now, and Reuben raised himself to the knot-hole to look out again. His eyes focussed on the infant in the manger who was waving a tiny fist in the air. Reuben looked at the small face that was turned in his direction and which suddenly broke into a gurgling smile. The baby seemed to be looking right at him, and from force of habit he lowered his head swiftly. Then he smiled at his own foolishness, and, realizing that he had smiled, he smiled again. That was probably the first time he had smiled in thirty years.

Thirty years! His thoughts went back to the days long ago. His father -- no, he wouldn't think about his father; the less he remembered of him the better it would be. His mother -- it had been a long time since he had thought of her. In the years after she had died he had thought of her often, with a lonely, empty feeling. Then he had begun to live this hard life and he had thought of her less and less often. She had been a good mother; what was it she had always told him? "Be a good boy, Reuben, and grow up to be a good man; Jehovah likes good boys and good men, but he doesn't like bad ones."

He stirred rather uneasily, though he could scarcely have told why. Perhaps it was a small spark of his conscience that had remained alive through the years. Grow up to be a good man. What was a good man, anyway? Whatever it was, he was reasonably certain he wasn't it, and for some reason the thought made him uneasy. He tried to recall something else his mother had told him and which he had not thought about for many, many years. Jehovah likes good boys and good men; Jehovah -- it was something about Jehovah. Ah, that was it. Jehovah can see everything you do and someday -- Reuben shook his head angrily and forced the thought from his mind. Why should he remember such nonsense after all these years?

He heard some sounds from the other side of the partition and raised himself to look out. The man was sitting beside his wife and unwrapping a small parcel. Reuben saw that it was a package of food and with the realization he stifled a low moan. Food! He had not eaten anything since early morning and it was now past the middle of the night. He was so hungry that his stomach ached and now the sight of food almost drove him to a frenzy. It wouldn't do to show himself, but -- His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the pair before him. The woman was sick and weak and the man had his back turned toward him. A few quick steps from the end of the partition would be all he would need to reach them. His hand closed on the handle of his knife and he started to stand up. Then, abruptly, he stopped, and returned to the knot-hole as another thought came to him. The baby; what would become of the baby if he should kill the parents? Again he looked at the tiny figure in the manger; he was asleep now, but there was still a half-smile on the little face. For a long time Reuben looked at that little face, and then he slowly sat down again. He looked at the parents again and saw that the food was almost gone; there wasn't enough left now to be worth it, he told himself, and he sighed queerly as the last bite disappeared.

Reuben felt tired and suddenly very old. He lay down again with the rolled-up blanket under his head and did not move for a long time. Finally he heard a voice from beyond the partition.

"Joseph, it's very cold."

With an effort, Reuben again raised himself to the hole. The baby was still asleep but was now lying in its mother's arms. The man was still sitting there looking at them. As the woman spoke, he got to his feet rather uncertainly.

"The innkeeper said someone might have left a blanket lying around," he said in a hopeful tone.

Reuben could hear him looking around the stable but he found nothing; and in a few moments he came back.

"Maybe the innkeeper has something. I'll see."

Before Joseph even took the first step toward the door, Reuben knew he wouldn't find anything. All the innkeeper's rooms were full; he had many guests and all his blankets would be in use. Furthermore, it was now very late and after being awakened at this hour he would not be sufficiently sympathetic to make a very whole-hearted search.

All this Reuben knew in an instant. He felt sorry for the people, particularly for the baby; it was so little and so helpless. Then he did something which even he could not have explained. He picked up his blanket which he had been using as a pillow and lifted his arm to throw it toward the door. He hesitated for a moment, as another thought occurred to him. These people obviously did not have much money. Swiftly he pulled the fat little bag from his pocket and stuffed it between the folds of the blanket. All this took but an instant; then he tossed the blanket toward the door where it fell in the semi-darkness. Fearily, he lay down again, dimly conscious of the exclamations of the man as he picked up the blanket and hurried back to the woman and the baby with it. They were saying something, but Reuben was too tired to listen.

It must have been a long time - it seemed like hours - before he became conscious of his surroundings again. He listened and heard many voices. Were they coming after him again, before it was even light? He raised himself and looked out. There were more men in the stable; he could see three. Their clothing and their long staves told him that they were shepherds. That was good; they were not searching for him then. But what were they doing there; perhaps they meant some harm to the baby? The thought made Reuben suddenly grow tense, as he realized that the parents had no way of putting up a defense and that he was the only one who had a weapon. His hand closed on the knife handle again, at the same time that he dimly wondered what he expected to do in his weakened condition. He didn't know, but he felt that he must do something.

Then he relaxed his hold on the knife and his eyes widened as he witnessed a strange thing. The shepherds suddenly got down on their knees before the baby as if they were worshipping him. Reuben stared. What was this strange thing that was taking place before him? He felt as if he could hardly believe his eyes. But then he was even more surprised and startled. The shepherds were taking out gifts and presenting them to the baby. He couldn't quite see what they were, at least not all of them, but he did catch a glimpse of gold. Gold! Gifts to a baby! What did it mean?

Reuben felt he must be dreaming. He lay down again and waited. Perhaps when he looked again there would be just the man, the woman, and the baby. But even as he lay there with that mad thought running through his mind he knew that would not be, for he could still hear the low murmur of their voices. They were talking very softly and indistinctly, almost with a tone of awe and reverence, he thought. He could not hear all that was said, but he did catch part of it.

"Angels," one of the shepherds was saying. "Angels - heavenly chorus - glory to God in the highest - on earth, peace, good will among men."

With a start, Reuben suddenly realized that his mind had been wandering and that he had laid there in a semi-conscious state for some time. All was quiet in the stable now and when he raised himself with a great effort, he saw that the shepherds had gone. The woman was asleep, with the man sitting near her, and he also was asleep. The baby was still lying in its mother's arms but it was wide awake and had its eyes wide open, and again seemed to be looking directly at Reuben. The thought was unnerving, somehow, and the wounded man lay down again so he could not see.

How long had it been since the shepherds had left, he wondered? He wished he had heard more of what they had said; maybe he would have been able to learn something of what they had been talking about. As it was, he had heard only a mumbling of words, just enough to confuse him all the more.

That was it he had heard them say? "Angels - heavenly chorus." What on earth did that mean? What about angels? What kind of a heavenly chorus? What nonsense was this, anyway? "Glory to God in the highest - on earth, peace, good will among men." That made about as much sense as the rest of it, and yet - - and yet what? He certainly didn't understand what it meant, but the words did have a peculiar rhythm and he found himself saying them over and over to himself. "Glory to God in the highest; glory to God in the highest; glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, good will among men; good will among men; good will among men." The words carried his thoughts back again to his mother and the many things she had told him so long ago. Good will among men. That seemed to remind him of something. For a moment he couldn't place it, then many memories came flooding back in a painful rush. On the day that his sister had been taken and - - no, he could not think of that again. On that day he had run sobbing to his mother and asked the question, "Why?" She had bravely

wiped her tears and had told him a story, a story of something that was going to happen someday. She had said that a Great Man would come who would stop all these evil things. He was going to destroy these enemies of theirs and they would live in peace and happiness.

Reuben had remembered that story for a long time. He had been only a little boy at the time, but he had thought of that Great Man many, many times; it had been a sort of refuge from his troubles and miseries. But then as the years went by he had gradually started to ask the question, "When?" and when things still went on as they had before, the story had gradually been forgotten.

Strange that he should remember it now after all these years. But he remembered it well; as he closed his eyes, he could even see his mother telling it to him. "And we will live in peace and happiness." His mother disappeared from before his eyes and he seemed to see the shepherds again. "And on earth, peace, good will among men."

Suddenly Reuben was afraid; he did not know of what, but he was afraid. He was seized with a strange urge, the desire to pray as his mother had taught him so long ago. He knew it was silly and very strange, but he had already done enough other strange things that night; this was certainly a queer night in his life, he told himself. First, he had hesitated to kill two people for some food; that had been because of the baby. Then he had given them his blanket and money; and that had been because of the baby, too. And now he felt like praying; was this also because of the baby? Perhaps; he wasn't quite sure.

He felt a breath of cold, night air sweep in on him and saw that a board was missing from the wall of the stable. He hoped that the baby was warm under his fine blanket. The baby; it was the baby that had made him do those other things. Was it the same tiny infant that now made him want to pray? The thought shocked him; he, Reuben, wanted to pray! He smiled a little at his foolishness, but he could not laugh off the desire. With what little remained of his fast-waning strength, he crossed his hands on his chest. An odd thought ran through his mind; he should kneel if he was going to pray. Then he shook his head; he was too tired and weak; he would have to pray the way he was.

"Oh God," the thoughts came slowly and with difficulty, "Oh God, I am not a good man. If you see everything we do, then you know that I am not a good man."

He hesitated and frowned as a sound caught his ears. He seemed to hear music, strange music, unlike any that he had ever heard before. It was as if many voices were singing together, many beautiful voices.

"And I should have been a good man, too. My mother warned me many, many years ago. She said that someday - Someday - - ."

The voices again; they were getting louder. He strained his ears to hear the words they were singing, but he could not understand them.

"When that Someday comes, oh God, have mercy on me!"

He could almost understand what the voices were saying, but not quite. Slowly turning his head toward the hole where the cold air swept in upon him, he saw that it was beginning to grow light outside. The damp mists were rising from the fields, and the sky in the east had a faint red color. He saw that there were many men in the yard; they were gathering from many directions and were pointing and talking among themselves. They were gathering to search for him again. They would kill him if they found him, but, strangely, he was not angry at them anymore. No, he was not even angry at the girl who had screamed. It had not been her fault; he had been wrong. It had been his fault; everything was his fault.

His eyes closed and still he heard the voices singing. They were getting closer now, and louder, increasing all the time in a mighty, swelling chorus, and at last he could hear the words they were singing. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will among men."

His hard, tired face relaxed into a happy smile, and then he seemed to be with the many voices, singing with them. The Great Man had come, and the words they were singing had come true.

-oOo-

"Look for instance at the story of the Magi: those scholars of the ancient world, turning from their abstruse calculations and searching of the heavens because they saw a new star, and driven to seek along fresh paths for a clue to the mystery of life. What they found does not seem at first sight what we should now call 'intellectually satisfying.' It was not a revelation of the Cosmic Mind, but a poor little family party; yet there they were brought to their knees--because, like the truly wise, they were really humble-minded--before a little, living, growing thing. The utmost man can achieve on his own here capitulates before the unspeakable and mysterious simplicity of the method of God; His stooping down to us, His self-disclosure at the very heart of life. After all, the shepherds got there long before the Magi; and even so, the animals were already in position when the shepherds arrived."

—Evelyn Underhill, The School of Charity