

# Christmas Eve: An Angel Story

December 30, 2001

This story comes from Kingslake's book *Angel Stories*.

## Sermon

Mary had been to the village school and could read almost any-thing. But she had only one book of her own: a Bible given to her by her father at her christening. She read this Bible at all hours of the day, and became so absorbed in it that she scarcely knew whether she was living in modern England or ancient Palestine.

Her father did not trouble her very much. He was a good-natured man, and cared little how she occupied her time, provided-ed there was a meal ready for him when he returned from the fields.

At a neighboring farm there lived a very old man called Gaffer Hawkins. Nobody knew how old Gaffer was. He could remember everything that had happened in the village since before there were any roads. One Christmas Eve, Mary called in at the farm to buy some eggs and milk. She got talking to Gaffer Hawkins, who sat huddled up in a rocking chair before the fire.

"Do you remember the first Christmas, Gaffer, when the Lord Jesus came into the world?" she asked. "I mean, did folk know about it over here in England? You wouldn't have seen the star, would you, all that way off? Fancy, if the Lord Jesus had been born here in Elmwood, instead of in Bethlehem of Judah!"

Gaffer rocked in silence for a few moments. "I don't exactly remember what happened, my dear," he began, in his cracked voice; "only what the Parson reads in church. But folks do say that the Virgin Mother and Joseph, them the Good Book tells of—you know?" (Mary nodded excitedly)—"folks say that every year, on Christmas Eve, they go a-wandering up and down the world seeking shelter, because there wasn't no room for them at the inn."

Mary's dreamy eyes flashed brightly. Then her face fell. "The Virgin Mary and Joseph, you say? Isn't Jesus himself with them?"

"Other folks do say it ain't the parents at all, but the Blessed Child himself that goes around seeking shelter. I don't rightly know. I can't recollect that he ever came to Elmwood. Stands to reason, don't it? He's got a lot of big towns to visit before he comes to a little village like this. But he'll come one day, don't doubt."

She was all excitement again. "Do you think he might come tonight? It's Christmas Eve, you know. Suppose he does?"

"He might. You never know."

Mary hurried home through the snow, her mind on fire with hope and fear. What if he came to see her? She would not fail him. She would be ready. Why, perhaps he had called at the cottage while she was out? No, there were no fresh footprints.

She pushed open the door. How filthy everything looked! A dirty tablecloth, with pots and needlework and rubbish lying all over it; thick dust on the photographs and ornaments; the couch tilted up on a broken leg; crumbs and mud on the carpet. What would the Holy Child think when he came in?

She began to put things straight. She cleared the table, put on a clean tablecloth, swept the floor, dusted the mantel, propped up the couch on a box, and washed the crocks left over from several days' meals. Then, when everything was neat and tidy, she began to prepare supper. She would cook enough for three. She wasn't a good cook, but she could make a tasty hot-pot. And they would have pudding too. Christmas Pudding! She got out an old cookery book, and set about the experiment with enthusiasm.

While the meal was cooking, she put on her overcoat and gathered some holly and ivy to hang above the pictures. It was get-ting dark, so she lit candles round the room. Why not a Christmas tree? She went out again, and broke a bough off a fir tree in the garden. This she stood upright in a bedroom jug, supporting it with stones. She decorated it with oranges by threading cotton through the skins and tying them to the branches. Then she bound a candle to the top of the tree and lit it. She clapped her hands with delight! When would he come?

She was just arranging the chairs by the fire when there was a step on the path. Her heart thumped loudly and her face went red. But it was only her father.

He blinked in at the door with astonishment. "Why, Mary!" he cried, and his eyes filled with tears. He took her in his arms and kissed her—a thing he hardly ever did. "I thought you had forgotten that it's Christmas Eve," he said.

"I hadn't forgotten. Look, here's a chicken for tomorrow's dinner. But how clean everything looks!"

He made a tour of inspection. "You've mended the couch too." He sat on it and jogged up and down, smiling. Then an idea struck him. "I'll pop over to the store," he said, "and get some-thing for the Christmas tree. I shan't be long."

"Father," whispered Mary, "do you know why I've done all this? Gaffer Hawkins says the . . . the Christ Child himself may come to Elmwood tonight, and I wanted to be ready for him."

Father shook his head. "I've heard that story before, but it's only an old tale.... There, there! Don't look so disappointed! We'll pretend he is here." He looked embarrassed. Then he added hastily, "I'll get those things," and made for the door.

Mary sat and thought. What if it were only an old tale? She didn't mind now. She had never seen her father look so happy in her life before. What a lazy girl she had been! She felt quite ashamed of herself. Well, she would keep the house as nice as this always. Yes; she would scrub and clean it every day, so that when her father came in from the fields he would laugh and kiss her as he had done that night.

He would be back soon. She opened her Bible and began to read. Here was the place. She held the Book close to the candle.

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.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, O Holy Christ Child, for visiting us this Christmas with the wonders of your love. May we always have ears to hear the angel chorus singing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace toward all people of good will.” Amen.

Rev. Brian Kingslake