

THE INNKEEPER'S WIFE

A familiar story shared from a different point of view.

The innkeeper's wife wears a long dress of dark, ordinary fabric, with an apron-like garment wrapped around. She carries a cloth and broom. She gives an occasional swipe with the cloth at imaginary dust and a push of the broom at imaginary dirt. She is peppy, volatile, and frequently paces, gesturing as she speaks.

(The innkeeper's wife enters hurriedly, out of breath.) Oh, my! I'll stay back here where Caleb can't see me. *(Peeks around imaginary corner to check on Caleb's whereabouts.)* The people on the rooftop will just have to wait awhile longer for their meal...Ohhhh, whatever has happened to the Bethlehem I used to know? It was so peaceful before the Romans marched in.

(Suddenly realizes she's addressing an audience.) Oh, pardon me! I'm Leah. My husband—he's the fat one with the bald head over there *(gestures around corner)*—he owns this inn. We aren't usually this busy, but the last few weeks have been terrible! It's this census that the Roman emperor has ordered. Can you imagine? Everyone has to go to the town where his ancestors came from, so all the people can be counted and registered. Sounds like a lot of nonsense to me, but what do I know?

Caleb is so happy for the business that he's falling all over himself to cram as many people into the inn as possible. That means that Leah runs and runs, and climbs and climbs, and cooks and cooks, and cleans and cleans! *(Becomes breathless thinking about all her work, then becomes confiding.)*

Do you know—Caleb had so many guests packed in last night that he sent some people down to the stable to sleep! I couldn't believe it when he told me to send Nathan down to clear it out! "Caleb," I said, "are you out of your mind? That stable is in no condition to have people in it!"

But I knew it was useless to argue, so I took some food and water down there. It's behind the inn, built into the hill. I grumbled to myself all the way down there. It wasn't enough that I had to run up and down to the rooftop. Now I had to run up and down the hill, too!

(Her voice softens and her face becomes loving.) But when I saw those people in the stable, my heart went out to the girl. Mary, her name was, from Nazareth. Imagine! From Nazareth! That's all of 70 miles north! And her in that condition! Listen, I've had eight children myself, and I wouldn't wish a 70 mile donkey ride on my worst enemy if she was about to have a baby!

My, she was so pale and tired, but she didn't complain at all. Me! I'd be raising the roof! ... And Joseph, her husband, was so kind to her. I helped him make a bed for her on the hay and sent Nathan up the hill for a warm blanket. There wasn't much else we

could do. I hated to leave her. I knew it wouldn't be long before that baby came, but I had all the other guests to feed and take care of.

(Pauses a moment and ponders.) It was almost midnight before I had a chance to get back to the stable. Caleb was sleeping by that time, and everything was pretty quiet. But it was so bright outside! There was one gorgeous star hanging over the town. It seemed like I could just reach up and touch it.

And do you know what? Mary's baby had been born sometime during the evening! There he was, lying in a manger full of hay. He was wrapped in swaddling cloths that Mary had brought along. Joseph had found that little manger way back in the stable and cleaned it up for the baby. It made a perfect little bed. And Mary looked so beautiful and happy! She sat close to the manger, watching every move that baby made.

(Almost at a loss for words to explain her feelings.) I...I can't explain it...There was such an air of peace and joy in that old stable...Some of the animals were standing in the back, watching all the activity...and grass roots were growing through the ceiling...But it didn't seem to make any difference at all. We could have been in one of Solomon's golden palaces!

(Pauses, again remembering.) And then the strangest thing happened. Some shepherds from the hills outside of town came to the stable door. Joseph talked to them quietly and then let them in. The men of the hills crept over to look at the new baby. They fell to their knees, and one of them said to Mary, "The angel of the Lord told us that we would find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Mary just smiled at them.

(Incredulous.) I couldn't believe my ears—an angel did he say? Then another shepherd said, "He is the promised Savior that Isaiah wrote about. He is Christ the Lord!"

(Pauses again, hardly knowing what to say.) Well! I'm just an ignorant, unschooled woman. What do I know?...But I have always looked for the promised Messiah. The promise is in all our sacred writings.

(Tries to remember writings.) He is to be born from the line of David, and one of the prophets said that...Bethlehem was to be the place...That tiny, innocent baby in our old manger...could he be the Messiah? I wonder...I wonder!

(After pause, jumps to attention.) Oh...oh, my! I've got to go! After I serve the people on the rooftop, I want to bring a hot meal down to the stable. *(Soft, loving expression on her face and in her voice.)* I want to see the baby again! Mary said his name is...Jesus. *(Exits hurriedly.)*