

The
Gift of Grace

a story by Stephen Cosgrove

*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea
in the days of Herod the king,
behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,
saying,
"Where is he who has been born the king of the
Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and
have come to worship him."...*

Matthew 2:19b-11

This then, is the story of Grace, a servant girl, and her parents,
who traveled in waiting with the wise men from the east.

The Gift of Grace

East of east and west of the unknown world was an exotic land.

In this land there lived great men of learning - scholars, who read all there was to read and saw all there was to see.

These men studied and gazed at the stars on cold, crystal nights to learn more about the world we lived upon.

Among these scholars were three wise men, three kings - Melchus, Caspar, and Phadizarda.

Here, in this land, they lived in regal splendor, for their knowledge was great and riches were given by the rulers of this land to those who were wise and knew how to prophesize.

Living with these wise men, was an old male servant called Philandron, his wife Esther and their daughter Grace.

Together, they cooked the food, washed the clothes and did any bidding the scholars asked.

Grace, who was six and almost too young to be working, was a hardy child of good cheer who eagerly scampered about the grounds as she fetched this or that for the three wise men.

Early one evening as Grace was serving a simple supper to Caspar in his study, the other two wise men burst excitedly into the room.

They were in such a hurry that they bumped into Grace.

A goblet went one way, grapes and cheese the other, as Grace and the tray fell to the floor.

The kindly scholars helped her to her feet and while she cleaned up the mess, they quickly told Caspar of an amazing discovery:

Now it had been written in ancient records that a child was to be born, who would be the King of the Jews - a King of Kings. This event was predicted to happen when a new star appeared in the heavens.

Grace giggled and turned her head, for even she knew that stars didn't just '*appear*' in the sky.

Her quiet laughter stopped abruptly, as Melchus pointed high into the purpled sky. There, a bright, white light crazed into the sky like a shiny jewel.

Indeed it was a new star.

The three kings immediately began to plan for a journey to see this newborn king, a journey that would have them gone for a long, long time. It was decided that Philandron and his family would go along as servants and everyone rushed about packing a bit of this and a bit of that.

Much attention was given to the special gifts that the Three wise men were to present to the new born king. They argued on and on about who was to give what.

They finally decided to give the child riches of gold and special perfumes called frankincense and myrrh.

These gifts were wrapped in colorful silks and satins, and then to protect them on the rough journey to come, the delicate gifts were safely packed in blankets of soft, woolen fleece.

That night Grace sat on the floor at the foot of her parents bed and opened the basket where all her worldly goods were kept.

For, you see, Grace was worried about the giving of gifts to the baby. "If this is to be the birth of the King of Kings, then even I must give a gift. But I have nothing I can give."

Like all servants of the time, Grace and her family were very, very poor but even so Grace had some special things saved away.

In the flickering light of a candle she carefully looked all of her meager possessions.

She had a large straw doll tied with faded ribbon.

She had a carved wooden horse,

and she had a tattered scarf.

"It isn't much," she thought, "but at least it is something. Even baby kings need toys, so the straw doll and the wooden horse are perfect and the scarf, though tattered, will make a fine wrapping."

Very carefully she wrapped the straw doll and the wooden horse in the tattered scarf but still the package seemed fragile. Unlike the wise men she had no lambs fleece to wrap her gifts in.

"I know," she said quietly to herself, "in the morning I'll find weeds and grasses to safely pack about my gifts."

Then, after snuffing out the candle, she slipped into bed with her parents and fell into wonderful sleep filled with dreams of the journey to come.

Everyone was up very early the next morning, for that night when the star again appeared in the sky the journey would begin.

The servants and the wise men bustled about doing this and that. Blankets and clothes were bundled and tied into packs on the backs of great humped camels. Clay pots were filled with dried foods and goat-skin bags were filled with water. The pots and bags were secured in a wicker wagon that was to be pulled by a brown-eyed, floppy-eared donkey.

Grace too had to work. Her chores included packing hay for the donkey to eat on the trip and collecting bundles of kindling sticks they would need to start the daily cook fire. This too was packed into a wicker wagon. Many supplies were needed for the long journey to come.

It was later that day as the sky darkened from pink to purple, that Grace began searching something to protect her gifts from the jarring journey to come.

She looked and she looked and finally found some blossoming weeds at the edge of the potters wall. The weeds were nothing more than tiny white blossoms on wiry stems, but the weed-flowers were star-shaped and reminded Grace of the star they were to follow.

She quickly picked an arm-load and packed them gently around the other gifts and wrapped all in the large, tattered scarf.

She wrapped the bundles of weeds around the straw doll and the wooden horse, then attempted to pack this large bundle safely in the wicker wagon.

There, to her dismay, she found that the wagon was over-packed and there was no room for her gift. She looked and looked but nowhere could she find an empty spot.

Finally without telling anyone, she removed a bundle of kindling and a big armful of the donkey's hay. Then, and only then, was there room for her gift for the baby... the King of Kings.

As night fell and the star again appeared with the cold, bitter winds of winter sweeping about the land, the three wise men, gaily robed and bobbing on belled camels back, began their journey.

Not far behind, in a bit of swirling dust, Grace rode upon the donkey that pulled the wagon as her parents walked beside.

They traveled all through the crystal night, following the great star that guided them on their way.

Only when the blackened skies paled from purple, to rose, to pink did they stop to rest, as the star disappeared with the dawning of a new day.

This was the way it was to be; travel at night following the star, only stopping to rest during the day when the star disappeared.

Everyday Grace's routine was the same...she would slide from the donkey's back and in the surrounding forest she would gather wood for the fire. Then, using the dry kindling from the wagon, she would strike flint to rock to start the cooking fire, so that her mother could prepare the early morning meal.

As her mother cooked and her father set-up camp, Grace would feed the donkey a bit of hay and draw some water from the goat-skin bags so that the donkey could drink.

They would all eat their meager meal and fall asleep.

Late in the afternoon as the sun set and the star again appeared, they would wake, quickly re-pack their supplies, and continue their journey through the night.

For nearly two months they traveled this way, and the farther they traveled, the colder it got and the deeper the snow. The nights were bitter cold, and snow swept and swirled about them as they pushed on and on.

Early one bitter-cold morning as they stopped to rest, Grace again collected damp snow-covered branches fuel for the fire. As she had done countless times before, she went to the wagon to get the kindling wood to start the fire.

But all the kindling was gone!

Try though she may to light the snow-covered wood, the fire would not start.

The three wisemen and Grace's parents paced about waiting to warm themselves before the fire. "I packed enough kindling wood," grumbled her father, as he stomped about in the snow. "I don't know where it's gone. Without the fire we shall be very, very cold."

Grace hung her head in shame, for she knew what had happened. With frozen tears streaming down her cheeks, she told her father what she had done -- that she had removed several bundles of kindling so that she could pack her gift in the wagon.

Then silently she went to the wicker wagon and brought her father her precious gift for the King of Kings. She untied the colored yarn wrapped round and took out the wooden horse.

Her father, knowing the sacrifice being made, but knowing also that they would surely freeze without the fire, reverently chopped the wooden horse into tiny kindling-sized pieces. Saving most for the days ahead, they used the rest to start the fire.

That day Grace couldn't eat the hot meal, she felt so ashamed.

But all was not lost, for she still had the large straw doll to give as gift to the child.

Several days later, calamity struck again. This time it was the donkey's hay that was all used up.

Once again Grace knew that she had done wrong in removing the donkey's hay from the wagon to make room for her gift.

But this time the remaining gift would be saved, for she had packed her gifts in the flowers of the weeds that grew. The weeds would surely provide a meal or two for the donkey and all would be saved.

She carefully unwrapped the gift again but instead of flowering weeds, there were only dried stems and seeds which wouldn't make a meal for a mouse.

With a shaking hand, she removed the straw doll. She carefully unwound the ribbon and the doll was once again nothing more than just straw. Slowly she fed handfuls to the very donkey.

The donkey ate but ate reluctantly. For even he knew the sacrifice being made.

That night and the next, they traveled and soon found themselves in the little town called Bethlehem.

Here the star stopped, frozen in the sky above a lean-to barn behind a humble inn.

Bearing the gifts they had carried so far, the three wise men and their servants reverently entered the barn.

There for the first time they saw the new -born child!

Oh, what a wondrous sight! A baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Though the surroundings were poor, there was great majesty here.

Then the wise men presented their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But all these riches paled at the wonder of this birth.

There was no doubt... this was the Christ Child.

Grace was so excited and awed by all, that it took a moment for her to remember that she had left her package in the wicker wagon. Quickly she raced back to the dirty cobbled street to retrieve her gift.

As the donkey looked on with sad, brown eyes, Grace grabbed the bundle and raced back to the barn.

There she stood in front of the manger above the child, and with shaking fingers unwrapped the faded, tattered scarf that had held her gifts so long.

Then, and only then, did she remember that her gifts had been burned by the fire and eaten by the donkey.

The dried seeds of the weeds that remained in the ragged scarf, scattered about the manger and the baby lying there.

Poor Grace fell to her knees beside the gnarled wooden legs of the manger sobbing in distress. Tears blurred her eyes and she could not see the child, nor his mother Mary smile in wondrous understanding.

And then the countenance of the Lord shone down on this little girl as her tears dropped to the ground falling gently on the withered seeds.

Watered by her tears, and warmed by the sweet breath of the Christ Child, the seeds miraculously began to grow.

One-by-one, white star-shaped flowers sprang into blossom filling the manger with the glory and essence of life.

And even to this day those weeds, turned seeds, turned flower are called Babies Breath... the gift of Grace to the Christ Child.

Joyous Noel