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CHRISTMAS HAS A MESSAGE

THE LOAD WE CARRY

It happened on a Middle-East winter night. Not at all cold as one would expect it in our hemisphere at this time of the year. Nor as sticky and warm as the tourists experience it when they travel through modern Israel during their Summer holidays. It was just the right temperature to make speedy progress which, in the view of the small company, was exactly what they were trying to do.

Except one of them. One wouldn't have thought that just this one counted at all. Why should the opinion of a simple donkey be of any importance to decent folk? That is what one of the travellers, called Joseph, thought. Usually he is described as a very modest and peaceful man, doing nobody any harm and being an example of acceptance and endurance. But that night he wasn't. He used his stick quite frequently on the back of the poor animal in front of him. With the result that once more in the history of man an individual made the astonishing discovery that hurt pride and stupidity are the most difficult powers to overcome.

"Why on earth didn't we leave the stubborn creature at the stable in Bethlehem?" he sighed. "By now we should be far away across the frontier if ever we should be able to escape the soldiers of Herod. But instead of hurrying up, the donkey stops at every bend of the road, delivering great speeches on his noble birth and developing quaint theories about anything which just comes to his mind. Curse it! I can't stand it any more."

"Well," said Mary, who from her

seat on the beast's back had been looking over her shoulder more and more often, afraid that somebody was following them. "Well, I must say, I find this donkey a most interesting creature. After all he has the gift of speech which is quite exceptional among animals."

"Not at all, not at all in our family," protested Manfred, groaning deep from his donkey throat. "I already told you that this is in our family. I am a late descendant of the most famous donkey in the world which, as is recorded in the Old Testament, had a very important conversation with his master, the Prophet Bileam (Numbers 22). Mind you, the Prophet himself could learn quite a lot from his donkey."

Thus Manfred spoke and full of pride lifted up his big head and, deep in thought, completely forgot to go on walking. And as a donkey has long ears and Manfred had a specially beautiful pair of long ears, it happened that by lifting up his head they touched the face of baby Jesus, tickling it so that he, for the first time in his young life, sneezed. Mary had to smile at the sweet expression on her baby's face.

"What was this?" whined Manfred and looked round, his face a picture of stupidity.

"Look," said Mary, "that is the cause of all our anxiety. This child is in great danger. Soldiers are behind us and if they catch up with us they will certainly kill him!"

"Oh my God," was all that Manfred could say to that and much to Joseph's relief started to move again. But not for long. There in the middle of the desert he stood again on his four stout legs and

hold forth pompously. "Where is justice? This poor little baby, just born, has certainly done nobody any harm. Why should he be killed? Don't we believe in Almighty God? He surely knows about us being in trouble, sees us on our errand through the desert. Why doesn't he do something, destroy these soldiers of terrible Herod with one big smash? I sometimes really doubt the omnipotence of God. Perhaps the modern theologians are right who say that God is dead."

Mary answered: "Listen carefully, I have to tell you a secret: This child in my arms is the Almighty's son, the Son of God who has to be saved by all means from the persecutors behind us. It is too early for him to die on the third day of his life!"

"He shouldn't die at all," exclaimed Manfred, and fell into a good trot showing that he was well able to move fast and still discuss very important matters. "He shouldn't die at all. He is the son of the Almighty God. I am not going to save the baby just to be killed!" And his back curved like a slice of melon under the responsibility of his load. "There is a prophecy in the book of Zechariah," he quoted solemnly "saying that the Messiah will ride to Jerusalem as a great hero and everybody will applaud him. He will ride on the back of a fine donkey foal and the slender feet of the beautiful beast won't touch the stones of the street at all because people will have spread rich carpet on the pavement as they will for great kings. That will be a wonderful show. In my species lies the future!"

"Don't get lost in your grand phantasies!" Mary interrupted him. "Come back on earth! This one whom you are carrying has given up all his power and possessions and become poor and small. And you are still dreaming of becoming big and powerful and almighty. Come on, dear, do your simple duty. Carry Him. That is my duty. It is all our duty. The future lies in those who carry!"



May Samichlaus this year bring pleasure to all children but very specially to those not quite so well off, the handicapped and those unfortunate enough to find themselves in hospital.

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