

THE QUIET HOUR

A Mid-Wife's Tale

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My job was usually in the kitchen, from six in the morning until ten at night. The rest of the time was mine, they said 'Thanks very much', I thought, '—for nothing !'. At six I had to light the fires and get the first pots of water on the *sigri*. Not that the inn-keeper wasn't up at the same time, but somehow I always felt less rushed when the guests were still snoring their heads off. But the old man who owned the place always kept his eye on my movements. "No slacking, Rachel" he would say. "No slacking, indeed !"—That old miser would even try to get a dead body to stop slacking !

But there were three times in the day that I enjoyed. One was the time that I could sleep, so that hardly counts. And another was getting the milk, because that meant getting out of the hotel and along the road to the man who kept the goats. His wife was just about my age ; my friend she was, and the task of fetching the milk gave me the chance to hear all the news. One other time I liked was when I had to take special trays of food up to the guests. It was always interesting to see what sort of people they were. Some were rich enough ! Merchants with huge stomachs and greedy eyes. Some were travellers, spinning yarns of distant places, and with sharp knives hanging from their belts. Handsome men, some of them were, and the boys, too. It was interesting to see their style of dress and their headgear. Sometimes it was definitely home-made from up-country, some with glass beads and leather tags. Some was definitely foreign.

But the queerest job I ever had to do, and one that gave the most satisfaction for that matter, was at the time of the census. The hotel was really bursting at the seams. I had even had to give up my bedspace and to sleep in with the family—all for the sake of a few more coins—not that I saw any of them. They were all 'his'!. On this particular night I was just about tired out. It had been a long day and there was no stopping. The place was full of guests. We'd even rented out the shed at the back of the inn. And pretty cold it was too ! Anyway, I was just about to go to bed when I heard a familiar voice. "Rachel ! Just get a bowl of hot water, will you and my special clean sharp knife and go with my wife round to the mule shed. That girl's in labour and her husband hasn't a clue."—Not that any man ever has, of course, where that sort of thing is concerned. A nice girl she was, too. A bit uncertain about things, but somehow relaxed, and having put the men out and got some clean rags ready, it wasn't long before the baby put in his appearance. Came out clean, he did. It's a boy." I told her." "Yes, I knew it would be a boy", she said. So confident she was, I felt a bit annoyed. "You must be a prophet's daughter, Ma'am." I said. "No, not that." she replied, quiet and sweet like, "God told me long ago that it would be a boy". When I stuck my head out of the curtain and said to the father, "It's a boy," he just said, "Yes. He has been given his name already. *Yeshua-ben-Yusuf*." "Ah, called after your father, I suppose" I said. "No, not really" he said. Well, I would have laughed at anyone else, but I didn't laugh at these two, though they were not much better off than I was, from what I could see of it ; but they were—well 'sincere'. So I just said "God bless you all then, sir", and he grinned and found a coin to wish me well. But the matter didn't end there.

The next morning, as soon as I was up, I went round to see if everything was all right—and what d'you think ? ! The whole place seemed to be swarming with shepherds. "What in the name of mystery are all you men doing here ?" I asked. "No sheep here ;—only babies !" One of the men whom I'd met at the goat keeper's place said "Oh we know that. We've just come to wish our new leader". "New leader !" I said. "who told you he's to be a leader ? God, I suppose ? !" "Yes." he said. I thought I was becoming cracked. "God spoke to them" I said, indicating the parents. "Now God has spoken to you ! He'll be speaking to me next, I shouldn't be surprised !" Teasing a bit, I was. "Might well do so," he responded, "God sent an angel to tell us last night while we were in the fields that this Leader was coming. This is the one destined to save our people, so I shouldn't be surprised if He'll speak to a whole lot of people through this child".

Well, that was thirty years ago, now. And just after that I changed my job, and became a mid-wife of all things. Somehow I discovered I had a gift for helping babies into the world. It's always seemed much more use than fanning fires and kneading dough. I've brought many babies to the light of day,—and you never know what they're going to be when they grow up. Every one is precious and sort of special. 'God's gifts' they call them. I haven't any of my own, but quite a few of them live round about here still, and they call me 'Rachel Aunty'—and so do some of their own little tots. But somehow there will never be another like that one I've just told you about,—*Yeshua-ben-Yusuf*,—"God saves" it means. Well, we certainly need saving, for a poor lot we are when left to ourselves. I suppose it's a matter of wanting to be saved,—in God's own time, and in His way ; and being ready to listen. Somehow I even feel that perhaps God did speak to me all those years ago, for I got the feeling that He was letting me help Him when I held little *Yeshua* for the first time. And strangely enough I feel that I've been helping 'in small ways' ever since ! But still I wonder what's happened to *Yeshua-ben-Yusuf*. He must be thirty years old now, so if God's going to do anything special with him, then it can't be long now.