

CHRISTMAS IS
JUST AROUND
THE CORNER

Nicholas Gordon

Copyright © 2007 by Nicholas Gordon

This story may be used free for any personal or non-commercial purpose. For commercial use of this story, please contact the author at webmaster@poemsforfree.com.

CHRISTMAS IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

Marcellus was just finishing dinner when he heard the innkeeper arguing with someone at the front door.

"I told you, I'm full!" the innkeeper bellowed. "If I had a room, believe me, I'd give it to you. Am I supposed to put someone out so that you can get in?"

This was answered by a subdued murmur, something about a pregnant wife and the cold wind outside.

"It's this ridiculous census!" the innkeeper said. "Why can't they count people where they live instead of where they were born?"

Some more murmurs, something about the cellar, the attic, the kitchen, anyplace.

"How about the stable?" Marcellus heard the innkeeper say. "I can make up the manger for you. The animals keep it nice and toasty. Warmer than a room in here, I bet you."

There followed some haggling over the price, then sounds of agreement, and the innkeeper ushered in a middle-aged man and his very pregnant and much-younger wife.

"You wait here while we make up the manger for the night," the innkeeper said. "If you want dinner with the room, it's two dupondii extra."

"No, thank you," the middle-aged man said.
"We've eaten on the road."

They sat down two tables away, but even so exuded enough cold so that Marcellus felt the chill.

"Peace be with you," the middle-aged man said to Marcellus, turning abruptly his way.

"And peace with you," Marcellus answered.

"Do you know, perhaps, of any place we might be able to spend the night?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm staying at the inn, just like you."

The man gave an ugly laugh. "Hardly!" he snorted. "We're staying in the stable!"

His wife put a hand over his, presumably to calm him down.

Marcellus felt for a chivalrous moment the urge to give up his room for the sake of the pregnant young woman, but said nothing.

"Do you know what the innkeeper is charging for allowing us to sleep in his manger?" the man went on indignantly.

"I have no idea," Marcellus answered, finishing the last bite of his cheese and washing it down with the last sip of his wine.

"Half price!" the man guffawed. "And nothing for the donkey if he stays in the manger with us. Does he think I want my wife to roll over onto donkey shit?"

The young woman again put her hand on her husband's, and to his credit he seemed to soften.

"I'm sorry," he said to Marcellus. "I didn't mean to spoil your dinner."

"I understand," Marcellus said.

Again, he felt the urge to offer his room, to offer to sleep in the stable himself. The woman seemed more and more beautiful to him, like a wise child, with a youthful freshness combined with mature compassion that seemed to Marcellus to be ideal in a wife.

But again, he said nothing.

"My wife might give birth even tonight," the man continued. "She's already begun to feel the pangs."

Is he trying to make me feel sorry enough to give up my room? Marcellus wondered with a flash of anger. Is that his game?

"May you have a healthy child," he said.

"Thank you. I don't suppose you would know of a good midwife."

"As I said, I'm a stranger here myself. But I'm sure the innkeeper knows of one."

"The innkeeper!" the man grumbled.

"I would think you don't have too many choices," Marcellus pointed out.

"True enough, true enough," the man said bitterly. "It's just not easy to accept that my child is to be born like an animal in a stable!"

Again Marcellus felt a flash of anger. If it weren't for the wife, he would have told the man just to shut up. But at the same time he felt sorry for both of them.

"The manger is ready!" the innkeeper announced as he came into the room. "All tidy and clean, with two beds of fresh straw. And your donkey in a stall."

"Thank you," the man said. "My wife has already begun to feel the pangs of birth. Do you know of a midwife?"

"Shall I send for one?" the innkeeper asked, looking at the young woman. "Is it time?"

The woman nodded.

"My daughter will take you to the stable. It's on the side street just around the corner. I'll go fetch the midwife."

"Good luck!" Marcellus said as they were leaving the room.

The woman cast a smile back, so gentle and grateful that one last time Marcellus felt the urge, more powerfully than ever, to give them his ample room and spare her the indignity of giving birth in a manger.

But once again he said nothing, and they left the inn.

That night as he lay on his soft bed in the finest room at the inn, with heat still radiating out from the glowing embers in the fireplace, Marcellus thought of the young woman giving birth in the stable just around the corner, and he wondered why he had not done the generous thing and offered her his room.

It was unlike him to be selfish or to care more about creature comforts than about honor. As a Roman soldier he had spent many nights sleeping out

in the cold, and now it would be nothing for him to spend a night in a stable.

So why had he, three separate times, said nothing? What had kept him from speech?

He felt ashamed and couldn't sleep. Getting out of bed, he went to the window, which rattled with the wind. But the stable was around the corner, and all he could see was the deserted street in front of the inn.

There were many things in life that you would like to take back, Marcellus thought. What was, was, and was perhaps what was meant to be.

Still, his unchivalrous behavior left a bad taste. He wondered whether the child had been born, whether it and its beautiful young mother were well, whether the stable really was as warm and comfortable as the innkeeper had said it would be.

He hoped all was well. The moment he might have intervened had flowed by him and was now far downstream.

Sighing, he went back to bed and was soon fast asleep.