

A Shepherd's Tale

1) Young Joe Turnicock had always known he would be a shepherd when he grew up. His father was a shepherd, working on a large estate with a team of shepherds, looking after the large flocks of sheep belonging to a rich duke. Even when he was very young, Joe had liked nothing more than joining his father in the fields, tending to the sheep and lambs. And now that he was fifteen, he was finally old enough to take on the job of shepherd boy. He was very proud to have his own responsibilities and earn a little money in return. It wasn't always an easy job; it was fine in the summer when the weather was warm, but in the winter, the fields were cold and dark and the job was tough. But with his father and the other shepherds to help him, Joe was happy to be learning the job properly.

2) Along with Joe's father, there were two other shepherds. Arnold Smith was the head shepherd. Joe didn't like him much. His job was supposed to be organising the team to make sure that all the sheep got the best care, but Arnold seemed to think that his job was to boss the others around while doing the minimum amount of work possible. Joe was glad that Arnold didn't come out to the fields that much. He thought his father and the other shepherd knew much more about sheep than Arnold did. The other shepherd, an old man named Gabe, had been shepherding for over fifty years. He knew everything there was to know about the job, and also about the land that they worked on. Gabe was no longer fit or active, but his experience on the hillside was invaluable and Joe loved working with him.

3) So, when Christmas came around, Joe didn't mind that he would be spending Christmas Eve out in the fields with Gabe. His mother had made a fuss, saying that he should be in bed that night as he was still young, but Joe had been secretly pleased that his father had insisted that Joe work through the night. Because Joe was so young and Gabe was so old, it had been decided that the two of them would be stationed in the near fields where there was a nice sturdy shelter. It also meant they would be closer to home for the morning. Joe wondered what it would be like, coming home on Christmas morning instead of waking up in his own bed. His little sister would be hunting for her Christmas stocking without him this year. But Joe was pretty sure that there would still be a Christmas stocking for him, and it would be just as exciting to open it when he got home.

4) Before it got dark that Christmas Eve, the shepherds gathered at Joe's house, where Joe's mother gave them all a hot meal; all the shepherds except Arnold, that is, who had given himself the night off. It meant that Joe's father had to go out to the far fields alone, but Joe knew that his father would do the job just as well on his own. Despite the fact that they were about to go out into the cold night, it was merry and jolly around the table.

"Thank you, Mrs Turnicock, that was a fine feast," said Gabe. "Just what we need before we go."

"And I've plenty of food for you to take with you," said Joe's mother.

"Did you give us some of those mince pies you've been baking?" asked Joe.

"Of course I did," said Joe's mother. "I know how much Gabe likes a mince pie."

"I surely do," said Gabe. "All I need out there is a good fire and a fresh mince pie. Couldn't ask for anything more, except maybe a spot of music to pass the time."

"Don't worry, I've got my penny whistle," said Joe.

"Then we're all ready to go," said Gabe.

5) It was a still, cold night. The sky was very dark and twinkling with stars. A thin sliver of moon cast only a faint silvery light, just enough to make out the shadowy shapes of the sheep in the field. When the party reached the first field, Joe's father said goodnight and left them to go on to the far fields. Gabe and Joe set about making their camp for the night. Settled in a corner of the field, where an old shelter was built into the stone walls, they built a fire. A quick check on the sheep told them that all was well, and so they settled down to keep warm by the fire. Joe had a thick blanket to keep him warm, but he soon realised that it was going to be a long night, and he wondered if he should have taken up his mother's offer of staying at home. The thought of his nice cosy home, filled with all the good smells of his mother's baking, made him feel a little forlorn. He remembered Christmas Eve of the year before, when he had played carols on his penny whistle while his sister toasted chestnuts in the fire. Still, at least he had his penny whistle, even if he didn't have the hot chestnuts.

6) Joe and Gabe had not been sitting long when they heard footsteps coming towards them.

"Who's there?" Gabe called out.

"Tis I, Moses Gump," called back a voice. "Don't you recognise your old friend?"

"Ah, Moses," said Gabe. "Come to join us, have you? Come, take a seat by the fire and warm your old bones."

"Less of the old," said Moses. "I'm only five years older than you Gabe Wilson."

The two old men chuckled together. Joe knew that they had been friends for years and years. Moses had been a shepherd too, but he had given it up because of his arthritis. But that didn't stop him wandering out to the fields every now and then, just because he missed it so much.

"You should be in bed, Moses," said Gabe. "Christmas Eve is no night for an old man like you to be abroad."

"But Christmas Eve is the best night to be out," said Moses. "I'd much rather be out here than be bored at home. I know you agree with me, Gabe. So you won't send me home."

7) "Aye, you're right," said Gabe, "it is a good night to be out. Especially when Joe's mother has provided us with such a wonderful feast. I don't suppose that has anything to do with you being here?"

"A feast from Mrs Turnicock, eh?" said Moses. "Well, maybe I could help you eat some of it. Would there be mince pies?"

"Oh yes," said Joe. "You're very welcome to join to us. I know my mother has given us plenty."

"That's kind of you," said Moses. "And to go with it, I've brought us a drop of something special." And he held up a brown bottle.

"That'll do nicely," said Gabe. "Come join us by the fire Moses."

So Moses settled himself down next to Joe. "So, young Joe," he said. "This is your first Christmas Eve on the hillside, is it not? Are you ready for it?"

"I think so," said Joe. "It is just like any other night, isn't it?"

"Christmas Eve is not like any other night!" said Moses sternly. "What have your father and Gabe been teaching you?"

"Calm down Moses," said Gabe. "I was just about to start telling him the stories before you interrupted us."

8) "What stories?" asked Joe.

"Old stories," said Moses. "Christmas night stories. It's what shepherds do on Christmas Eve. Some of the stories are as old as the hills, passed down from elder to shepherd boy through the generations. You learn them from us and maybe one day, you'll be telling them to your own grandchildren."

"Does my father know them?" asked Joe.

"He does," said Gabe.

"What about Arnold?" asked Joe.

Gabe snorted. "If he does, he don't care about them. But he's not a real shepherd, just a man with a job. And only a real shepherd knows the stories like we do. Tonight, you'll hear them for the first time, and you'll already be a better shepherd than Arnold."

Joe swelled with pride. He made up his mind that he would be here every Christmas Eve from now on, learning the stories until he could tell them for himself.

"Please do tell me a story," he begged. "I want to hear them all."

9) “Let’s start with a snack to keep us going,” said Gabe.

“And a nip to keep out the cold,” said Moses. He pulled out the bottle and took a swig, then handed it to Gabe. Gabe also took a long swig.

“Ah, that’ll keep us toasty and warm,” he said. He offered some to Joe, but Joe knew from experience that strange drinks from old men’s bottles usually made him cough and didn’t taste very nice, so he politely declined. Instead, he shared out the mince pies. The two old men enjoyed them so much that they instantly wanted another, and Joe had to wait impatiently while they munched their pies, and then needed another swig from the bottle. But finally, Moses brushed the crumbs from his beard and was ready to begin.

“Now then, how about the tale of the headless horseman,” he said. “That’s always a good one to start with.” Joe shivered with pleasure. He loved a good ghost story, especially at night. Gabe and Moses knew some good ones, full of creepy details and fantastic outcomes. No matter how spooky the story, Joe didn’t feel frightened, because he knew he was listening to two master story tellers, spinning their tales with skill and dexterity.

10) As the night went on, Moses and Gabe made their stories more and more creepy, but still Joe wasn’t scared and he begged them for more.

“He’s a brave one, this lad,” said Moses. “I remember being his age, hearing those stories for the first time, and being too scared to close my eyes.”

“I love your stories,” said Joe, “but I don’t think I believe in them. I know you’re very good at telling tales, and I think you’re probably just as good at making them up too. And nobody really believes in shepherd’s tales.”

“Ha, quite right,” said Gabe. “You have a sensible head on your shoulders. You’ll do well in life, just mark my words.”

“Well, now, if stories of ghosts don’t fright you, how about something else?” said Moses. “After all, it is Christmas, a time shepherds like us always remember a very special story about some other shepherds.”

“Ah yes, the best story of all,” said Gabe. And in his rich, melodious voice, he went on to tell the story of a birth in a stable, and a field of shepherds visited by angels.

11) Joe, of course, knew the story about the first Christmas, and how the first to know the good news had been the shepherds in the fields over Bethlehem. He had heard the story many times in his life. But this was the first time he had heard it while sitting in a field, late at night, surrounded by nothing but fields of sheep. When it came to the part of the tale when the sky above the shepherds was lit as bright as day by shining angels and filled with heavenly music, he suddenly felt a shiver run down his spine. When Gabe told about the fear that those shepherds had felt, cowering together in fright, Joe felt it too. When Gabe described the mighty voice of the angel, ringing out from the heavens to spread the good news, Joe could imagine how magnificent it must have been, but also how terrifying at the same time. Looking out at the dark field, Joe wondered what he would do if it suddenly became bright. What if they looked up into the sky and saw angels above them? Joe knew he would feel like screaming, and wondered if he would have the courage to listen or if he would run away instead. He didn’t feel so brave any more. At that moment, he found himself praying that there would be no angels that night.

12) “That’s why being a shepherd is such an honourable job,” finished Moses. “It wasn’t the kings and rich folk who first saw the infant Jesus, but humble shepherds like us. Don’t you forget that lad.”

“That’s something Arnold Smith should remember,” said Gabe scornfully. “He thinks he’s too high and mighty to be out in the fields on Christmas Eve. Well he would have been too busy snoring in his bed to hear the good news, and he would have missed the honour of taking a gift to the baby Jesus.”

When he heard this, Joe felt ashamed of himself for being so afraid of seeing angels. But still he trembled and tried to keep his eyes on the fire.

“Aye, Arnold Smith is no shepherd,” said Moses. “I bet he never saw the animals kneeling at midnight on Christmas Eve.”

“Animals kneeling at midnight?” said Joe in surprise.

“That’s right,” said Gabe. “Didn’t you know? Christmas Eve is a sacred night, and even the beasts in the fields know it. Legend says that when the bells strike midnight, they get down on their knees to pay their respects to Christ.”

13) It sounded like another tall tale to Joe.

"But that can't be true," he said. "Everyone would know if animals did that."

"Would they?" said Moses. "Look around, who is here to see them? Only us shepherds, and everyone knows that a shepherd's story can't be believed. Isn't that right, lad?"

"So it's not true?" said Joe.

"I never said that," said Moses. "I just said it wasn't believed. But I know what I've seen, out here in the fields on Christmas Eve."

"Me too," said Gabe.

"So you have seen them?" asked Joe in wonder.

"With my very own eyes," said Gabe. "The sheep and the oxen, down on their knees, showing their respect to our Lord."

"Amen," said Moses.

Joe stared out at the sheep with wide eyes. "Will we see them tonight?" he asked.

"Maybe," said Gabe. "But you have to want to see it. Maybe you're a year or so too young for that."

14) Joe didn't know how he felt. The thought of seeing Angels had been terrifying, but seeing sheep kneeling was different. He thought about what Gabe had said; you couldn't see it until you believed in it, but how could you believe in it if you never saw it. It seemed like a trick to Joe.

Moses chuckled. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "I remember feeling the same way when I was your age."

"I remember hoping it wasn't true," said Gabe, "because seeing something like that would be terrifying."

"I'm not scared," said Joe defensively. "I just don't see how it could be true. If my father had seen it, he would have told me himself."

"A sensible man like your father would wait until you could see it for yourself," said Gabe. "Why do you think he insisted that you spend Christmas Eve out here with me tonight?"

"Because we have a job to do," said Joe stubbornly. "He wants me to learn my responsibilities."

"Aye, that he does," said Gabe. "But there are different types of responsibilities that come with this job. And tonight, you're learning more about them."

15) Moses passed around the bottle again. Both he and Gabe had drunk quite a bit by this time and it made them quite merry. They shared some more food, and cracked some jokes and made each other laugh, but Joe sat quietly. All this talk of angels and kneeling animals had put him in a bad mood. He was beginning to wonder if he was suited to being a shepherd after all. That made him sad, because it was all he had ever wanted to be and he didn't know what else he might do instead. He also knew that his father would be disappointed to hear that his son didn't want to be a shepherd anymore. But Joe knew that he didn't want to be a shepherd like Arnold Smith, who didn't know the stories and stayed in bed on Christmas Eve. The boy looked down at the town, where a few lights still twinkled in the dark buildings. Most people would be asleep by now, including his mother and little sister. As if to confirm this, he heard the church clock strike the hour – eleven o'clock. One hour to midnight.

16) Joe added some more wood to the fire, making it burn hot and bright. In the warmth, the two old men grew quiet, and then their heads began to nod. Before long, they were both asleep, wrapped in their blankets against the stone wall, snoring away. Joe suspected that the special drink that was so good at keeping out the cold had also made them sleepy. But he forgave them, knowing that old men needed to sleep more than young boys, and at least he was still here to watch the sheep. If anything happened, they would wake at once. And this gave Joe a chance to prove his worth; no matter how much he might be doubting himself, he was determined to stay awake that night. When he felt his eyes growing heavy, he jumped up and walked around a little to wake himself up. He looked out into the field. It was reassuringly dark, with no sign of any angels. To test his courage, Joe wandered away from the fire, into the middle of the dark field.

17) Once he was away from the light of the fire, Joe felt as if he was swallowed up in the darkness. All he could see was the light of the stars above him. At that moment, they looked brighter than he had ever seen them before in his life. After staring at them for a few minutes, he looked around the field and realised that his eyes had adjusted to the dark; now he could make out the sheep around him and the hedges around the field, and even the old tree in the far corner. But his eyes were drawn back to the sky. Out there in the middle of the field, the earth seemed very wide, and the sky was even wider, a vast emptiness that went on forever. Joe knew from his school lessons that the Earth was a ball hanging in the sky; at that moment, he almost felt that he could feel the planet spinning, with himself just a tiny speck clinging to the side. He had never felt so small, while everything around him seemed so far vast and far away.

18) But just as Joe was beginning to tremble, the sound of a sheep coughing somewhere very close brought him back down to earth. Whatever was going on in the universe, he was still just Joe, a shepherd boy out with his sheep, with his feet very firmly fixed to the ground. Joe smiled to himself, happy with his situation, no matter how humble. He looked around at the sheep, noting how peacefully they were all sleeping. And then, a faint sound drifted across the hillside. It was the bells of midnight. Joe counted them carefully. After the twelfth stroke fell silent, it seemed that everything else fell silent too. Joe held his breath, listening hard, but there was not one sound to be heard. The sheep were silent, the air was still and breathless, and nothing around the field moved. All Joe could hear was the beating of his own heart.

19) Joe stood as still as the world around him. It seemed to him that everything was waiting for something, though he could not say what. Then he looked at the sheep again. Were they really sleeping, or were they kneeling, waiting just like Joe. Suddenly Joe knew without doubt that they were all waiting for the same thing. His heart was bursting with wonder; here he was, a humble shepherd, witnessing a miracle, experiencing the same joy that those chosen shepherds had experienced so long ago. It was so thrilling that he wanted to shout out in exhilaration. But he didn't want to scare the sheep or spoil the perfect peacefulness of the moment. He glanced back the fire and could just see the shapes of the two sleeping men. Would they be cross if he went back to wake them? He couldn't bring himself to do that, and besides, he felt sure that it would break the magic if he tried to share it with anyone. But it seemed wrong to just stand there and do nothing. He had a growing conviction that such a special moment deserved something special in return.

20) Then Joe had an idea. In his pocket was his old penny whistle. He pulled it out and put it to his lips. The first note came out a little squeaky, but he took a deep breath and blew again, remembering to keep his breath gentle and steady. The clear, pure note rang across the field beautifully. When Joe stopped, he could hear the note echo back to him before fading away. Around him, the sheep remained peaceful. Seeing that, Joe made up his mind and began to play. He knew how to play all the old Christmas carols, and he started with his favourite, *The First Noel*. The beautiful old melody danced through the air, complementing the peacefulness rather than spoiling it. And as he played, Joe was sure that he could see the sheep turning their heads towards him. They were listening, and they approved. He played on and on, glad that he was marking this special night along with the sheep.

21) He could have gone on playing all night, but then he heard a noise that brought him to a sudden stop. It was a shout, coming from over the hill. He listened again, and this time, he heard it clearly enough to recognise his own name. Someone was shouting "Joe" across the field. In amazement, Joe looked up at the sky, feeling sure that he was going to see the angels appearing. But instead of being scared, he was full of gladness and excitement. He realised that angels were not something to fear, but a mysterious honour, and he wanted it more than anything else in the world. The shout came again and Joe could hear that the voice was full of love and warmth. It was exactly how he thought an angel would sound. The sound of it made him feel full of happiness.

22) "Joe!"

The voice was getting nearer. Joe prepared himself, getting ready to kneel alongside the sheep. But even though the stars were still very bright, there was no shining lights, or angelic singing. Instead, he could just make out a single person walking through the field. And when that person shouted again, Joe realised why he felt so much love; it was his father, striding across the field towards him. Joe was too happy to see him to feel any disappointment. He ran to him and flung his arms around him.

"Merry Christmas Father," he said.

"Merry Christmas to you too Joe," said his father, hugging him tight.

"But why are you here?" asked Joe.

"I was coming to fetch you home," said his father. "I began to feel a bit guilty making you stay out all night on Christmas Eve. And then I heard the most beautiful music drifting across the hillside. I'd never heard anything like it before. And it being midnight, I felt sure it must be the angels, come to tell the good news."

Joe laughed. "That's funny, because I thought you were an angel calling to me," he said.

23) "It certainly feels like a special night," said Joe's father. "But what were you doing, standing here playing your whistle in the middle of the field?"

"It was for the sheep," said Joe. "Gabe and Moses told me that the animals kneel at midnight on Christmas Eve, to honour Jesus. And when I looked, I believed that they were, and I wanted to do something too. Does that sound silly?"

"Not at all," said his father. "Gabe and Moses told me those tales when I was your age, and I still believe them."

"I certainly do," said Joe. "Look at the sheep, father. I'm sure they're kneeling, not just sleeping."

"I think so too," said his father. "And I'm sure that they enjoyed hearing you play."

24) "But, Joe," said his father, "am I going to take you home to your bed, or would you rather stay here in the field with the sheep?"

Joe considered the question carefully. After all the excitement, he did suddenly feel extremely tired; not cold and weary, just pleasantly sleepy and content.

"I think I'm ready to go home," he said. "That's if Gabe and Moses don't mind."

"Let's go and say goodnight," said his father.

So father and son returned to the corner of the field, where the two old men were now sitting up, wide awake.

"That was some fine playing you treated us to," said Moses.

"Did I wake you?" asked Joe apologetically.

"It was a very nice way to be woken," said Moses, "just in time for midnight."

"So Joe, did you see them kneeling?" asked Gabe.

"I did," said Joe.

"And will you be telling everyone what you saw?" asked Moses.

Joe thought about it for a moment. "Only other shepherds," he replied. "Maybe, if I have a son, I'll tell him when he becomes a shepherd boy. And if I ever get to be as old as you, I'll tell all the young boys on their first Christmas Eve in the fields."

"Then our traditions are in good hands," said Gabe. "You'll make a fine shepherd, Joe."

Joe smiled. Not only would he be safeguarding the old tales, but he would be adding to them with his own story, of his first Christmas Eve in the fields; he knew he would never forget it, and he would always believe that he had been playing his music in the presence of angels.

Merry Christmas