WORK—AND A CHRISTMAS SONG: BY ELOISE ROORBACH

HEARTSICK, homesick, discouraged and weary, I sat at a desk in a grimy New York office building, searching my heart, soul, memory, imagination, for words, fragrant as flowers, with which to clothe thoughts of gardens, homes, Christmas-tide. How was I to write beautifully of gardens—never seeing one! How write tenderly of glowing hearth fires—having no home fire of my own! How write lovingly of Christmas-tide, of its joys, gifts, reunion with friends, family and loved ones—being far from family, friends and loved ones!

Suddenly a song, soft and faint, floated through the frostbound, grimy window. It came from above, as if some singer from another world was passing overhead. Gradually the aerial song grew more distinct, resolving itself into an old familiar hymn of my childhood—

Once in royal David’s city
   Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
   In a manger for a bed.

The murmuring voice of the invisible singer would stop, begin again, linger occasionally over a bar with a caressing tenderness, very softly as if singing to a sleepy child, stilling the clamor of my heart, sweetening the poison of my mind, staying my complaint.

A shadow flitted across the room, then down dropped into sight a man suspended by a rope, sitting upon a swinging seat, paintbrush in hand. My heavenly singer was a workman garbed in overalls, a paint-splashed hat upon his close-cropped head. No wings sustained him as he sang—a slight, treacherous rope dangled him along the face of the great building. His face was bright and he worked with fervor, leaning far from his narrow seat, holding fast to the rope with one hand as with the other he deftly and quickly wielded the brush. Unconscious of danger, undaunted by the cold, his face aglow with some happy thought, he contentedly worked while the bitter wind swayed him from side to side. With strong, sure hand he lowered himself out of sight—but what a gift had he unknowingly left! What a sermon unwittingly preached between the pauses of his song! What a benediction carelessly conferred! This priceless gift was a knowledge of the joy of work. His Christmas sermon had taught the dignity of work, the privilege, the honor, of being allowed to fill a place, however small, in a great city’s need. His Christmas benediction had shrived me of bitterness, weariness, loneliness, homesickness. My pencil no longer dragged, but sped along joyously with cheerful, loving Christmas “copy.”