

The Second Day of the Kings At the Crib. Their Departure

On the next day, the Kings again visited the Crib Cave separately. During the whole day, I saw much given away by them, especially to the shepherds out in the field where the beasts had been sheltered. I saw poor old women bent with age going around with mantles over their shoulders given them by the Kings' generosity. I saw crowds of Jews from Bethlehem thronging around the good people, trying by every means in their power to extort presents from them, and looking through all that they had with a design to cheat. I saw the Kings freeing several of their



people who wanted to remain among the shepherds. They gave them some of the beasts of burden with all kinds of covers and vessels packed on them, also golden grains, or gold dust, and they parted from them most cordially. I know not why their number was so diminished; perhaps many went away, or were sent home the preceding night.

There was also a quantity of bread given away. I do not know where they got so much, but true it is that they had it. They were accustomed to bake wherever they encamped. I think they must already have received a warning to diminish their luggage as much as possible on their return journey.

That evening I saw the Kings in the Crib Cave, taking leave. Mensor entered first alone, and the Blessed Virgin gave him the Child in his arms. He shed abundant tears, and his face was beaming with joy. Then followed the others and took leave with many tears. They again offered numerous gifts: a great roll of precious stuff; pieces of silk, some whitish, others red; also flowered stuffs, and many very fine covers. They left their large mantles also with the Holy Family. They were fine wool of a pale delicate color, and so light that they floated on the breeze. They brought also numerous dishes piled one above the other, boxes of grain, and a basket full of pots containing delicate green plants bearing tiny leaves and white blossoms. About three of these small pots stood in the middle of a larger one; still another could have found room between them and the rim of the large pot. They were arranged in the basket, one above the other. There were also long, narrow baskets containing birds, such as I had seen hanging on the dromedaries, and which they used for food. They all wept much when parting from the Child and Mary. I saw the Blessed Virgin standing by them when they took their leave. The Kings' gifts were received by Mary and Joseph with touching humility

and sincere thanks to the donors, but without any manifestations of pleasure. During the whole of this wonderful visit, I never saw in Mary the least shadow of self-interest. In her love for the Child Jesus and compassion for St. Joseph, she thought that the possession of these treasures would, perhaps, prevent their being treated in Bethlehem with such contempt as had been shown them upon their arrival, for Joseph's trouble and mortification on that account had been to her a source of suffering. Lamps were already lighted in the Crib Cave, when the Kings took leave. They went out behind the hill toward the east, to the field in which were their people and beasts. In it stood a high tree whose spreading boughs shaded a wide circumference. The tree was very old and had a legend of its own, for Abraham and Melchisedech had met under its branches. The shepherds and the people around regarded it as sacred. A spring gushed up before it, the waters of which the shepherds used at certain seasons on account of their healing qualities. There was near the tree a furnace which could be covered, and at both sides huts affording shelter at night. A hedge surrounded the whole tract. Thither went the Kings, and found all the followers still remaining to them gathered together. A light was suspended from the tree, and under it they prayed, and sang with indescribable sweetness. Joseph entertained the Kings again in the tent by the Crib, and then they and their nobles returned to their inn at Bethlehem. Meanwhile, the governor of the city, (acting on a secret order from Herod or moved by a spirit of officiousness, I know not) had resolved to arrest the Kings then in Bethlehem, and accuse them to Herod as disturbers of the peace. I know not when he was going to execute his resolve, but to the Kings that night in Bethlehem and to their followers in their tents near the Crib, an angel appeared in sleep, warning them to depart forthwith and to hasten home by another way. Those in the tents immediately awakened Joseph, and told him the order just received. While they proceeded to arouse the whole encampment and order the tents to be taken down, which was done with incredible speed, Joseph hurried off to Bethlehem to announce it to the Kings. But they, leaving most of their baggage behind them, had already started from the city. Joseph met them on the way and told them his errand. They informed him that they, too, had received similar instructions from an angel. Their hurried departure was unnoticed in Bethlehem. Issuing forth quietly and without their baggage, an observer might have concluded that they were going to their people, perhaps for prayer. While they were still in the Cave, weeping and taking leave, their followers were already starting in separate bands in order to be able to travel more quickly, and were hurrying to the south, by a route different from that by which they had come, through the desert of Engaddi along the Dead Sea.

The Kings implored the Holy Family to flee with them. On their refusal, they begged Mary at least to conceal herself with Jesus in the Suckling Cave, that she might not on their account be molested.

They left many things to St. Joseph to give away. The Blessed Virgin, taking the veil from her head, bestowed it upon them. She had been accustomed to envelope the Infant Jesus in its folds when holding Him in her arms. The Kings still held the Child in their arms. They were shedding tears and uttering most touching words. At last they gave their light silk mantles to Mary, mounted their dromedaries, and hurried away. I saw the angel by them in the field, pointing out the way they should take. The caravan was now much smaller, and the beasts but lightly burdened. Each King rode at about a quarter of an hour's distance from the others. They seemed to have vanished all on a sudden. They met again in a little city, and then rode forward less rapidly than they had done on leaving Bethlehem. I always saw the angel going on before them, and sometimes speaking with them.

Mary, wrapping the Child Jesus in her mantle, at once withdrew to the Suckling Cave. The gifts of the Kings and all that they had left, were also taken thither by the shepherds who had tarried around the encampment in the valley. The Kings' people who had preferred to remain behind their masters lent a helping hand.

The three oldest of the shepherds, who had been the first to do homage to Jesus, received very rich presents from the Kings. When it was discovered in Bethlehem that the caravan had departed, the travelers were already near Engaddi, and the valley in which they had encamped was, with the exception of some tent poles left standing and the footprints in the grass, lonely and still as before.

The appearance of the royal caravan had caused great excitement in Bethlehem. Many now regretted that they had refused lodgings to Joseph; some spoke of the Kings and their followers as of a swarm of adventurers, while others connected their advent with the accounts they had heard of the wonderful apparitions to the shepherds. I saw from the city hall a proclamation made to the assembled citizens; viz., that they should beware of all preposterous opinions and superstitious reports, and go no more to the abode of those people outside the city.

When the crowd had dispersed, I saw Joseph at two different times conducted to the city hall. The second time, he took with him some of the gifts of the Kings, which he presented to the old Jews who had taken him to task, and he was set at liberty. There was another way leading from the city to the neighborhood of the Crib Cave, not by the city gate, but from that place where Mary, on the evening of her arrival with Joseph in Bethlehem,

had rested under the tree while waiting for Joseph to find a lodging. This point of egress I saw the Jews blocking up with a fallen tree. They also erected a watch house with a bell from which was a rope stretched across the road. Thus anyone trying to go that way would soon be discovered. I saw also about sixteen soldiers with Joseph at the Crib Cave. But when they found besides himself only Mary and the Child, they returned to the city to report.

Joseph had carefully concealed the royal gifts. There were other caves in the hill under that of the Crib. No one knew of them but Joseph, who had discovered them long ago in his boyhood. They had existed from the time of Jacob who, when Bethlehem counted only a couple of huts, had there a tent with his followers.

The gifts of the Kings, the woven stuffs, the mantles, the golden vessels—all after the Resurrection were consecrated to religious uses. Each King had three light mantles and one, thick and heavy, for bad weather. The thin ones were of very fine wool, yellow and red mixed, and so light that they floated on the breeze as the wearers moved along. On festive occasions, they were exchanged for mantles of silk; they were not dyed, but of the original, lustrous shade. The train was embroidered around the edge with gold, and it was so long that it had to be carried. I had also a vision of the raising of silkworms. In a region between the country of Seir and Theokeno, I saw trees full of silkworms. Every tree was surrounded by a little ditch of water, in order to prevent the worms from crawling away. Fodder was scattered under the trees, and from their branches hung little boxes. Out of these boxes the weavers took chrysalides, about a finger in length, from which they wound off a web like that of a spider. They fastened a number of these chrysalides before the breast, and spun from them a fine thread which they rolled on a piece of wood provided with a hook. I saw the silk weavers among the trees at their looms, which were very simple. The strips of stuff woven were as wide, perhaps, as my bed.