

The Kings Arrive at Bethlehem

I saw the Kings leaving Jerusalem in the same order in which they had come. They left by a gate to the south: first, Mensor, the youngest; then Seir, and lastly, Theokeno. They were followed by a crowd as far as a brook outside the city, and here the rabble left them and turned back home. On the opposite side of the brook, the Kings halted and looked for their star. To their great joy, they saw it, and on again they went, singing sweetly. But what I wondered at was, that the star did not guide them by a direct route from Jerusalem to Bethlehem; they went more to the west and passed a little city that is well known to me. Beyond the same, I saw them halting at a beautiful place to pray. A well sprang up before them; they dismounted and dug a basin for the water, surrounding it with sand and sods. They remained here several hours and watered their beasts; for in Jerusalem, on account of their anxiety and trouble, they had had no rest.

The star, which by night looked like a globe of light, now had the appearance of the moon when seen by day; but still it did not appear exactly round, but somewhat pointed. I saw that it was often hidden behind the clouds.

The highroad between Bethlehem and Jerusalem swarmed with people, travelers with their baggage on asses. They were, perhaps, on account of the census, returning from Bethlehem to distant homes, or going up to Jerusalem to the Temple or the markets. But on the route taken by the Kings, it was very quiet. Perhaps the star guided them that way, that they might escape notice, and arrive in Bethlehem in the evening.

It was twilight when the caravan drew up before Bethlehem at the same gate at which Mary and Joseph had stopped. When the star had disappeared, the Kings went to the house, the former abode of Joseph's parents, and in which Joseph and Mary had recently been inscribed. Here they thought they were to find the newborn King. It was a spacious mansion with numerous small buildings around it, an enclosed courtyard in front, and stretching beyond that a lawn with trees and a fountain. I saw on the lawn Roman soldiers, because of the tax offices in the house. Crowds of people thronged around the newcomers whose beasts were being watered under the trees near the



fountain. The Kings and their followers dismounted. The people showed them every mark of respect; they were not rude to them as they had been to Joseph. They presented green branches, and supplied them with food and drink; but I could see that that was principally in consideration of the gold pieces which the Kings were freely disbursing.

I saw the travelers tarrying long in doubt and anxiety. At last, I saw a light rising in the heavens on the opposite side of Bethlehem over the region of the Crib. The light was like that of the rising moon. I saw the caravan again set out and wind around the south side of Bethlehem toward the east, thus bringing on one hand the field in which Christ's birth had been announced to the shepherds. They had to go around a ditch and some ruined walls. They had made choice of this route, because they had while in Bethlehem been directed to the valley of the shepherds as a good place for encamping. Some of the Bethlehemites followed the cavalcade, but the Kings said nothing to them of the object of their search.

St. Joseph appeared to know of their arrival. Whether he had learned it through someone from Jerusalem, or in vision, I know not; but I saw him during the day bringing all kinds of things from Bethlehem, fruit, honey, and vegetables. I saw him also clearing out the cave, making more room, taking away the partitions that cut off his own little sleeping place from the passage, and stowing away the wood and the cooking utensils under the shed before the door. When the caravan had filed down into the valley of the Crib Cave, all dismounted and began to set up their tents while the people that had crowded after them from Bethlehem returned to the city. The encampment was partly pitched when over the cave shone out the star and in it a Child plainly visible. It stood directly above the Crib, its stream of light falling straight down upon it. The Kings and their followers uncovered their heads and watched it sinking lower and lower, increasing in size as it approached the earth. It looked to me as large as a sheet, I think. All were at first amazed. It was already dark; no dwelling was to be seen around, only the hill of the Crib Cave, looking like a rampart on the plain. But soon their amazement turned to joy, and they sought the entrance of the cave. Mensor pushed back the door and there, in the upper end of the cave, which was resplendent with light, he beheld Mary sitting with the Child, and looking just like the Virgin they had so often seen in the star pictures. Mensor stepped back and told his companions what he had seen, then all three entered the passage. I saw Joseph coming out to them with an old shepherd, and speaking to them in

quite a friendly way. The Kings told him in a few words that they had come to adore the newborn King of the Jews whose star they had seen, and bring Him gifts. Joseph humbly bade them welcome, and they went back to their tents, in order to prepare themselves for the ceremony of their presentation. The old shepherd accompanied the Kings' servants to the little valley behind the hill, where there were sheds and shepherd stalls, in order to care for the beasts. The caravan filled the whole of the little valley.

And now I saw the Kings taking down from the camels and putting on their wide, flowing mantles of yellow silk. They fastened around their girdles with little chains, bags, and golden boxes with knobs, that looked to me like sugar bowls. They, along with the flowing mantles, made them look quite broad. They took also a little table with low feet that could be opened and folded at pleasure. It served as a salver. A cloth with tasseled fringe was thrown over it, and on it placed the boxes and dishes containing the gifts.

Each King was accompanied by his four relatives. All followed St. Joseph with some of their servants to the shed before the entrance to the cave. Here they spread the cloth over the table and stood on it several of the boxes they had hanging at their girdles, to be presented as their gifts in common. Then two youths of Mensor's train went in at the door, laid down strips of carpet all the way up to the Crib, and withdrew to a distance. And now Mensor and his four companions entered, having previously laid aside their sandals. Two servants bore the table with the gifts through the passage up to the Crib Cave; but at the entrance, Mensor took it from them, carried it in himself, and on bended knee placed it at Mary's feet. The other Kings and their companions remained standing at the entrance.

I saw the cave filled with supernatural light. Opposite the entrance and on the spot where Jesus was born, was Mary leaning on one arm in a posture more reclining than sitting; by her side was Joseph, and on her right, in a raised trough with a cover thrown over it, lay the Infant Jesus. At Mensor's entrance, Mary rose to a sitting posture, drew her veil around her, and took the Child, which she enveloped in its folds, upon her lap. But she drew the veil aside sufficiently to allow the Child to be seen as far as below the little arms. She held It upright leaning against her breast, Its little head supported by her hand. The Infant folded Its little hands upon Its breast as if in prayer. It was shining with light, was very gracious, and at times extended Its little hands, as if grasping something. Mensor fell on his knees before Mary, bowed his head, crossed his hands on his breast, and offered the gifts with some

reverent words. Then he took from the bag at his girdle a handful of little metal bars, about a finger in length, thick and heavy. They were pointed at the upper end, granular in the middle, and shone like gold. He laid them humbly on Mary's lap by the Child, as his gift to her. Mary accepted them graciously and humbly, and covered them with the end of her mantle. Mensor's companions stood behind him with heads lowly bowed. Mensor gave gold, because he was full of love and confidence, and had always with unshaken devotion and untiring efforts, sought after salvation.

When Mensor and his companions withdrew, Seir with his four relatives entered and knelt. He carried in his hand a golden censer, in shape like a boat, filled with small, greenish grains like resin. He gave incense, for he was the one that clung to God, voluntarily, reverently, and lovingly following His Will. He placed his gift upon the little table, and knelt long in adoration.

After Seir, came Theokeno, the eldest of the Kings. He could not kneel, because he was too old and stout. He stood bowing low, and laid upon the table a little golden ship in which was a fine, green herb. It was fresh and living, stood erect like a delicate green bush, and had small white flowers. Theokeno offered myrrh, for myrrh is typical of mortification and vanquished passions. This good man had had to struggle against severe temptations to idolatry and polygamy. He remained very long before the Infant Jesus, so long that I felt anxious for the good people, the Kings' followers, who at the entrance were so patiently awaiting their turn to see the Child.

The words of the Kings and their followers were extraordinarily simple and childlike; they were as if inebriated with love. They always began: "We have seen His star and that He is King over all kings. We have come to adore Him and to bring Him gifts." With the tenderest tears and most fervent prayers, they commended to the Child Jesus themselves, their goods, and property, all that they valued on earth. They begged Him to take their hearts, their souls, their actions, their thoughts; they entreated Him to enlighten them, to bestow upon them all the virtues, and to the whole earth to grant peace, happiness, and love. They were glowing with love. No words could depict their ardor and humility, nor the tears of joy that bathed their cheeks and flowed down the beard of the eldest. They were perfectly happy; they believed that, at last, they had entered into the star after which their forefathers had so long legitimately sighed, and at which they themselves had so longingly gazed. All the joy of the promise of many hundreds of years now fulfilled, welled up in their hearts.

Joseph and Mary also wept. I never before had seen them so full of joy. The honor paid their Child and Saviour and the recognition of Him by the Kings, of that Child for whom their poverty could afford so poor a couch, of that Child the knowledge of whose high dignity lay hidden in the silent humility of their own hearts—all that comforted them immeasurably. They saw brought to Him from so great a distance by God's almighty power, and in spite of the machinations of man, what they themselves could not procure for Him, viz., the adoration of the great, and magnificent gifts offered with holy profusion. Ah! They adored with those great ones, and the honor their Child received inundated their heart with exceedingly great joy.

The Mother of God accepted everything most humbly and thankfully. She spoke not, but the movement of her veiled head told all. The Infant Jesus lay on her mantle and covered by her veil, through which His little form shone brightly. It was only at the close of their visit that the Blessed Virgin addressed some kind words to each, throwing her veil back a little as she spoke.

The Kings now returned to their tents, which were lighted up and looked very beautiful.

At last, the good servants arrived at the Crib. During the adoration of the Kings, they had with Joseph's help erected a white tent on the hill toward the shepherd field to the left of the Crib Cave. They had brought with them on their beasts of burden the tent with all its covers and poles, the latter of which fitted into one another. At first I thought that Joseph had put it up, and I began to wonder where he had got it so quickly and opportunely; but when the caravan was about to leave, I saw that tent taken down and packed up with the rest. There was a kind of shed of straw matting put up in it, under which the chests were placed. After the servants had pitched the tent and arranged all things in it, they took their stand at the door of the Crib Cave, humbly awaiting admittance.

And now they began to enter, five at a time, accompanied by one of the nobles to whom they belonged. They knelt before Mary, and silently adored the Child. Lastly, came the boys in their little mantles, and then there may have been in all about thirty persons present.

When all had withdrawn, the Kings again came in together. They had changed their mantles for others of raw silk, white and flowing, and they carried censers and incense. Two servants had previously laid down over the floor of the cave, a carpet of a deep red color, on which Mary sat with the Child while

the Kings offered incense. This carpet Mary kept ever afterward. She walked on it, and took it with her on the ass to Jerusalem when she went there for her Purification. The Kings incensed the Child, Mary, Joseph, and the whole cave. This was with them a ceremony expressive of veneration.

I saw the Kings afterward in the tent reclining on a carpet around a little low table. Joseph brought in little plates of fruit, rolls, honeycomb, and small dishes of vegetables. Then he sat down and ate with them. He was so delighted, and not at all shamefaced; he wept for joy almost the whole time. When I saw that, I thought of my own father, and how, at my profession in the convent, he had to sit among so many fine people. In his humility and simplicity, he had indeed felt intimidated, but it did not prevent his giving vent to his feelings in tears of joy.

When Joseph returned to the Crib Cave, he removed all the rich gifts to a recess at the right of the Crib, where he had screened a little corner from sight. Anne's maid who had remained to wait upon Mary, retired to the little cellar like cave on the left of the Crib Cave, and did not come forth until all the visitors had departed. She was a quiet, modest person. I saw neither Mary nor Joseph nor the maid examining the gifts or showing any worldly pleasure on their account. They were accepted with thanks, and with liberality were again distributed to the needy. That maid was a relative of Anne, and a robust and very serious person.

On this evening and during the night, I saw in Bethlehem only at Joseph's paternal house a noisy bustling to and fro and, when the Kings entered the city, there was some little excitement; around the Crib Cave all was, at first, very quiet. After awhile, I saw here and there in the distance Jews lurking and whispering together, and giving notice in the city of what they saw. I saw also in Jerusalem on this day many old Jews and priests hurrying to and fro with writings to Herod, and then all became quiet as if they wished the subject dropped.

At last, the Kings with their people held, under the cedar over the Suckling Cave, a religious service. The singing was most touching, the boys' sweet voices mingling with those of the elders. After the service, the Kings went with a part of their followers to a large inn at Bethlehem. The others slept in the tents between the Crib and the Suckling Cave, which latter they had also taken possession of for the storing of part of their treasures. The white tent before the Crib was occupied by some of the most distinguished of the nobles.