

CHAPTER TEN

THE STAR IN THE EAST

One day a party of strangers on richly trapped camels passed through the streets of Jerusalem causing great excitement. Their riders, noble looking men, wore the high head-dress and mantle thrown back over the shoulders, which marked them as Persians.

They told a strange story. Months ago, whilst studying the midnight heavens, as was their wont, a star of extraordinary brightness had suddenly shone forth. They felt that it was sent to announce some great event. They knew that the whole world was expecting a Deliverer, and that the holy books of the Jews said a star should arise out of Jacob. This must be the star of the great King, sent to call them to His feet. They must go at once with the costliest gifts they could provide and offer Him their homage. Their people had mocked them; their families had tried to keep them back; but they were resolved to seek and find the Messiah at any cost. And so they had set out, three of them, towards Jerusalem, where they supposed He would be found.

"Where, then," they asked, "is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and are come to adore Him?"

Those who heard all this shook their heads and muttered as they turned away that it was a pity these travellers did not know what kind of a ruler Herod was, and that no man who valued his life would dream of speaking in Jerusalem of another king.

The news of their arrival and of their errand soon reached the palace, and Herod in great alarm summoned all the chief priests and the scribes to inquire of them where Christ should be born. They answered as with one voice:

"In Bethlehem of Juda, for so it is written by the prophet: And thou, Bethlehem, the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda, for out of thee shall come forth the captain that shall rule My people Israel."

The strangers now receive a courteous invitation to visit the king, with the assurance that he will do all in his power to aid them in their search. Simple and unsuspecting, they present themselves before him as he lies, splendidly robed, on his magnificent couch. He makes careful inquiries as to the star:

"What was it like? When and where had they first seen it? How long had they been on their journey?"

They are delighted to find him so interested and tell him the whole story. He shows himself very gracious and says he is pleased to be able to give them the information they require.

Bethlehem, six miles south of Jerusalem, is to be the birthplace of the Messiah. It is a little place, they cannot fail to find Him there:

"Go," he says, "and diligently inquire after the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word again that I also may come and adore Him."

The Magi thank him and set off without delay. No one cares to go with them; the priests and scribes who have told them where to find Christ do not trouble to seek Him themselves. "Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him." Thus did His own people receive the good news the strangers brought.

Surprised, but not disheartened, the Magi pursue their way, when, suddenly, the star they had seen in the East appears again and goes before them until it comes and stands over the place where the Child is. And, seeing the star, they rejoice with exceeding great joy. And entering into the house they find the Child with Mary His Mother, and, falling down, they adore Him.

They expected to see the King of kings in a splendid palace surrounded by courtiers. Instead of this they find in a poor cottage a child without attendants or comforts of any kind. Only a youthful mother and a humble tradesman keep watch beside Him. Can this be really a king? Can this be the great Deliverer the world is awaiting? Yes, such is their faith they believe Him to be both. They spread a carpet at His feet in Eastern fashion, humbly kneel down before Him, and, opening their treasures offer Him gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the East no king is ever approached without gifts. The Magi have brought the most precious their country produces, and very suitable gifts they are, for gold is a fit tribute to a king, incense is offered to God, and myrrh, the herb used for preserving bodies from corruption, shows that our Lord, though truly God, is man as one of us.

We are specially told that they found the Child "with Mary His Mother." It was by Mary that our Blessed Lord came to us: in the Holy Bible the Son and the Mother appear side by side, and in the Catholic Church they are never separated. His Mother was the dearest treasure our Lord had in this world, and, poor as He was, He had this treasure to the end. How glad we ought to be that when He came to this cold and sinful world, where there was no room for Him, He had her arms to fold Him, and her immaculate heart on which to rest His head!

He did not speak as He lay in her lap. Was He then like any other child? "Whence art Thou?" we can imagine the Magi asking as they knelt before Him. Mary answered for Him. She told them that He who had sent His star to fetch them was a real, little human child, but He was also the God of Heaven and earth, and they must worship Him. He had two natures, the human nature which they could see, the Divine Nature which they could not see, but He had only one Person, which was the Person of God the Son. They listened humbly, and bowed down, and kissed the little feet, and adored Him. And Mary gave them His little hand to kiss and blessed them with it.

At last they had to go. They were so happy, so glad that they had come. They would go back now to their own land and tell their people all they had seen and heard. And as long as they lived they would remember their visit to Bethlehem, and keep in their hearts the memory of the Mother and the Son. They had arranged to return by way of Jerusalem, but, being told by God not to go back to Herod, they went to their own country another way.

Meanwhile the king was waiting and wondering. Why did not the Magi come back? Could they have found him out and have tricked him who thought himself so clever in tricking others? How foolish he had been not to have them followed and watched by some of his own people. Finding at last that he had been outwitted by these simple-looking men, he was furious, and, sending his soldiers, killed all the male children that were in Bethlehem and in all the country round from two years old and under. In vain did the poor mothers try to hide or to defend their little ones. At their play, in their cradles, in the very arms of their mothers, these innocents were seized and slain, while shrieks and piteous cries were heard on every side.

And where was He whose life the cruel king was seeking ?

The night after the departure of the Magi, as Joseph slept, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him: "Arise," he said, " and take the Child and His Mother, and fly into Egypt, and be there until I shall tell thee. For it will come to pass that Herod will seek the Child to destroy Him."

Without asking a single question, Joseph arose, went to Mary and told her of the order. Like him, asking no questions, she rose quickly, put together some provisions, took her little Babe and wrapped Him up in the few garments she had, whilst Joseph collected his tools and went out to saddle the ass. Then he helped Mary to mount, laid the Holy Child in her arms, closed the door of the cottage and went out into the night.

Days and weeks they journeyed on, first through wild and hilly country, then across the trackless desert. There was no shelter for them when the rays of the sun beat fiercely down by day and the chilly dews fell at night. Day after day that dreary waste of sand stretched out before them. Springs of water were rare, and they suffered terribly from thirst. As they plodded on under the white light of the moon, or lay down to rest, they heard the bark of the jackal and the roar of the distant lion. The burning breath of the sirocco, with its whirling sand, might overtake them, robbers might swoop down upon them. But they were not afraid, for they knew that the little Child they had with them—was God.

At last the yellow wilderness is broken up by patches of refreshing green; further on they come upon fertile fields and the dwellings of men, and Joseph begins to look about for a place where they can settle down. But the idolaters view with suspicion these Jewish strangers; no one knows them, and they are homeless wanderers till Joseph is able to hire a little house. Then it is hard to get work, and though he and Mary stint themselves for the sake of the Child, they are so poor that many a time when He asks for bread they have none to give Him.

It seems to have been soon after the slaughter of the Innocents that Herod died and went to Judgment. What an awful account he had to give! To keep a throne of which death must soon deprive him, he had murdered his nearest and dearest, the priests of the Temple, and at last a whole troop of little children, among whom he hoped was the Saviour of the world.

There was nothing now to keep the Holy Family in exile, and the Angel who had ordered the Flight into Egypt appeared in sleep to Joseph saying: "Arise, and take the Child and His Mother and go into the land of Israel, for they are dead that sought the life of the Child." And he arose and took the Child and His Mother and came into the land of Israel. But hearing that Archelaus reigned in Judea in the room of Herod his father, he was afraid to go thither. He therefore determined to return to Nazareth in Galilee and settle there.