

CHAPTER EIGHT – THE FIRST CHRISTMAS NIGHT

At last the time came when Joseph too was to know what the Angel of the Lord had declared unto Mary. An Angel, perhaps Gabriel again, came to tell him who she was that swept and washed and cooked in his little cottage, and went about her daily work as the simplest and lowliest of the women around. He told him, too, that her Child was to be called JESUS, because He would save His people from their sins.

Think with what new veneration Joseph looked upon Mary now, and what quiet, deep talks they had together. They pondered the words of holy Scripture; they studied the types; they put prophecy by the side of prophecy. Because their hearts were so pure, they saw better than the learned doctors of the Law the meaning of these types and prophecies, and they wondered more and more that they should have been chosen to be so near to Jesus when He came. That blessed Name at which St. Paul says every knee should bow, each had first heard from an Angel's lips. How reverently they pronounced it. To the world outside, the Promised One all were expecting was "the Messiah," or "the Christ;" to Mary and Joseph alone He was "JESUS."

Mary and Joseph knew from the prophecy of Micheas that Bethlehem, six miles south of Jerusalem, was to be the birthplace of the Messiah. This was four or five days' journey from Nazareth. When were they to go? And what reason could they give to their neighbors for suddenly quitting their home? And were they to quit it for good? The answer to these questions was: "Let us leave all to God; He is watching and guiding everything; He has come to our help always in the past." And so they waited in peaceful trust for a sign of His Will.

One day there was great excitement in the marketplace of Nazareth. A decree had gone out from Rome for the whole world to be enrolled. Augustus Caesar, the Roman Emperor, who ruled over the greater part of the known world, wanted to find out how many people he governed that he might know the extent of his power, and how much he could tax his subjects. The Jews, who were subject to him, were to go to the city or town which was the home of their ancestors, and there give in their names and take an oath of fidelity to Caesar.

Now the townsfolk of Nazareth were a rough, quarrelsome set of people, easily moved to deeds of violence. They had such a bad name among their countrymen that it was an insult to call anyone a Nazarene. This decree of Caesar filled them with indignation. "Why should all men be disturbed and set on foot for his foolish whim, they cried. "O, that the Messiah would come quickly to free His people from the yoke of the wicked empire, and make all His enemies His footstool as David said!" However, they had to make the best of a command which they dared not disobey. A Roman official went the round of the town, came to the little house at the bottom of the street, found that Joseph was one of the family of David, and ordered him off to Bethlehem, David's city.

Here was the sign for which Mary and Joseph were waiting. What matter if the order were roughly given, if in going to Bethlehem they seemed to be doing Caesar's bidding only; God was arranging all things for them. Their preparations were soon made; the few things absolutely necessary put together; Mary seated on the ass; the door of the little house fastened behind them; and then Joseph took the bridle in one hand and his staff in the other, and they set out.

It was the worst season of the year, the road was bad, the weather cold, and they had no conveniences for the journey. Again and again Joseph led the ass into the ruts by the wayside to make room for some of David's wealthier descendants, well clad and well mounted, and, like their poor relations, bound for Bethlehem. Not many words were spoken. There was much for both to ponder, and there was much to suffer. Each day's halt brought fresh anxiety to Joseph, for there were no inns on the road, and the caravansaries, or khans, were devoid of every comfort. They were merely enclosed spaces surrounded by sheds; four bare walls and a mat were all the accommodation provided; food, cooking utensils, bedding, travellers had to bring with them, or do without.

The two journeyed slowly, and the evening of the fifth day was closing in, when, grey and dim on the hillside, the walls of Bethlehem came in sight. Party after party overtook them on the road, all hastening forward to reach shelter before nightfall. Joseph looked at Mary and urged on the tired beast. What could he do if the place should be full? At last they reached the khan, situated on the hill, a little way below the town. A glance round showed them they were too late. Every place was taken. Beasts and baggage crowded up the central square. On every side was shouting, disputing, the bustle and confusion of a crowd of travellers who had everything to do for themselves no one had time to attend to any business but his own, and Joseph's questions were roughly answered. He went back to Mary, whom he had left outside, and taking the bridle turned towards the city.

Night was falling as they passed within the walls, but there was light enough to see that it was full, full to overflowing. The better sort had long ago secured all that was to be had in the way of lodging. Poor people like themselves had little chance. Joseph searched diligently everywhere, but to no purpose. Wherever he saw a door open he hastened towards it; he pointed to Mary and held out his hand with the few coins he had left. But all in vain; everywhere the same answer:

"No room."

Up and down the streets they wandered that bitter night. No one would take her in. Joseph's tearful eyes looked up into her face. She was utterly worn out, but the smile on her lips told of a peace within that no trouble of this world could disturb. What was he to do? It was no use trying any more. He brushed his sleeve across his eyes and led the ass carefully down the hill again.

It was quite dark now, and he had to hold his lantern low to keep a safe footing. A little way out of Bethlehem a cave in a chalk hill opened upon the road. He said to Mary: "Let us go in here." The cave narrowed into an inner and smaller one, which seemed to be used as a stable, for an ox was there standing over a manger. They went in. Mary dismounted and knelt down in a corner to pray. Joseph hung up his lantern on the damp wall. Its flickering light showed the moisture trickling down on every side, and all the foulness of a neglected Eastern stable. This was the place which from all eternity God had chosen for the birthplace of His only Son. And here at midnight the Son of God was born; the Word was made Flesh and dwelt amongst us.

Mary bowed herself down to adore. Here was the Messiah she had so longed to see. Here was Jesus who by bitter pain was to save His people from their sins. Oh, how soon He had begun His work, she thought, as she looked upon the tiny limbs that lay trembling on the straw. Yes, this was He who, Gabriel said,

should be great and should be called the Son of the Most High. A Roman judge, struck by His meek majesty, will say to Him one day: " Whence art Thou ? " All through the first Christmas night His Mother is asking Him this question, not because she does not know, but because she cannot get used to the wonderfulness of the answer. She knows He has come from the highest heaven, from the right hand of the Father to whom He is equal in all things. And still He is her very own Babe, crying for her, nestling to her like any other helpless child.

She adores Him as her God. And then she takes Him up in her arms, wraps Him up in swathing bands, and lays Him in the manger on a handful of straw, the best that Joseph can find about. She is grateful to the two animals which share it with Him and stand over Him warming Him a little with their breath. The words of Isaias come to her mind: "The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib, but Israel hath not known Me, and My people hath not understood." No one ever understood and pondered the Scriptures as she did, and the words of prophecy come to her one by one as she worships there. This tiny Child is the Leader of God's people whom Micheas said was to come out of Bethlehem; whom Isaias called " the Hidden God" of whom David said: "God shall come manifestly, our God shall come." She and Joseph kneel beside Him, and look, and look, and wonder at the great God become so small, and at the love that has brought Him—to this.

About a mile from Bethlehem and lying at the foot of the hill on which the little city stands is a field into which the shepherds of the neighbourhood led their flocks at evening. All day the sheep roamed in safety on the hills, but as night drew on, when wild beasts prowled about, they were brought down here. Eastern shepherds belong to the very lowest and poorest class of the people; their lives are hard, for they must guard their flocks all day and in all weathers, and lie out with them on the wet grass in the bleak nights of winter.

A company of shepherds was watching in this field when Mary and Joseph took refuge in the cave. And at midnight "behold an Angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them, and they feared with a great fear. And the Angel said to them:

"Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people. For this day is born to you a Saviour who is Christ the Lord in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude of the heavenly army praising God and saying:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will."

And it came to pass after the Angels departed from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another:

"Let us go over to Bethlehem and let us see this word that is come to pass which the Lord hath showed to us."

And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph and the Infant lying in the manger. And all

that heard wondered, and at those things that were told them by the shepherds."

Why were these men called before all others to worship the new-born Child? Because they were simple and docile, and patient under the many hardships of their rough lives. And because the Holy Child would teach us from the first this important lesson—that poverty is not a thing to be despised or to be ashamed of. It is a very painful thing, because it puts out of our reach the comforts, conveniences and amusements which make life pleasant. We care far too much for these things. An apple was too great a temptation for Adam and Eve, and nice things in the shape of food, dress, scents, bodily enjoyment of every kind, are often and often too much for us, their children. 'Not that pleasant things always lead us into sin. But a life of ease and self-indulgence, in which such things abound, is always a dangerous life, because the body never says: "It is enough." It is always ready to indulge itself at the expense of the soul, and to get what it wants it will not stop at sin. We have to distrust it and to be on the watch always. This is why the poor are safer by far than the rich if only they bear their privations patiently.

Our Lord came on earth to show us the safest way to heaven, and to show us in the best of ways, by example. It cost Him a great deal to teach us in this way all His life, but He never thought of cost when He could help us by it. And so He began at once, the very night He was born, to teach us the value of poverty, and to comfort the poor. How easily, after that midnight visit to the cave, the shepherds would bear cold, hunger, weariness, the want of nice, pretty, comfortable things such as the rich can get. "The little Babe Messiah had nothing of this kind," they would say to one another; "surely, then, we can do without."

And we who have comfortable homes, and pleasures in plenty, what lesson has the poor Babe of Bethlehem for us? This at least, that we must learn to honor the poor, who are most like Him, and to deny ourselves at times that we may have something to give to them in their need. We ought to be glad to serve them and work for them with our own hands, because they represent our Blessed Lord who will take as done to Himself whatever kindness or unkindness we show them. See now why the shepherds were called first to the cave on the first Christmas night.