



CHRISTMAS STORIES

Innkeeper's Story

(He hadn't expected it, but he ended up making room for the King – listen to his story)

We've got a king who's taken up residence here, just outside of town. Well, at least he's with us some of the time. Can't say I'd want him any more than that. A little too close for comfort as it is! But, you have to make room for a king, whether you want to or not.

Kings demand attention. A good one makes it worth your while, establishing peace, giving protection, watching out for his people's needs. A bad one? Well, that's another story. But his presence presses on you all the same. You have to make room.

This one's got nice lodgings of his own – a palace and fortress and centre for courtly life all rolled into one. It's just southwest of the city here, looming over the whole skyline. King Herod the Great certainly knows how to make his presence felt, even though he leaves his dwelling empty most of the time.

Quite the opposite of mine of late. All this registration by family and town has brought many, many more visitors here than I ever could have thought to handle. I manage this inn, this four-walled khan, with its inner courtyard and small rooms in the outer walls, this place to "loose one's burdens and find shelter" – of a sort.

Yes, I'm an innkeeper, and proud of it, much as some of you would look down on me with scorn. Yes, we're considered of ill-repute, not to be trusted. Yes, there's

the frequent charge that we're always changing the price at the last minute for a night's lodging, leading to noisome and intense discussions with the "guests" as they're leaving. It can't be helped. It's a chaotic business, this, with all the variables of people and animals to be housed, and for "how many?" and for "how long?" The guests are always wanting more for less. You can't help the disputes when there's money to be paid.

But this after all is Bethlehem, so-called House of Bread. Surely there's enough to go around for everyone. Why am I begrudged a decent wage? Especially with my hands full, and so many travelers pressing in, clamouring for a spot, pushing for shelter here in the khan, here in the inn, here in David's town.

Yes, this is David's town, famed birth-place of the greatest of all Kings. Oh, if only he was the one still dwelling here, rather than the murderous likes of Herod, infrequent as his visits may be.

But us locals – the despised and the respected – still hold to the great promise of the prophet years ago:

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.*

The hope is for a new King, not like Herod – a good King, a King like David.

But do we really know what that means?

Which brings me to this strange story. A story of lodging denied, then found, of kingly announcements, of angels' proclamation, of prophecy's fulfillment, and of God's own visitation among us. Could it be? I don't know.

But it was in the thick of those coming to be registered that it all happened. The city was completely over-run. Tensions were running high. The khan here was full, the central courtyard abuzz with brayings of donkeys and cattle, and the regular bustle of the public market and animals butchered and sale of meat and wine and cider. There was hardly space to move. All the best rooms above the central archway had long been spoken for, and the small cramped quarters in the outer walls, such as they are, were filled to overflowing. There was not one single vacancy anywhere within.

It was at that point a young couple, worn and dust-covered, approached on a mangy, bone-racked donkey. I see all kinds, but none more pathetic. The young woman, face puffy and tired, could hardly lift her eyes as she sat slumped, but upright, an arm laid across the girth of what had to be full-term pregnancy. She looked as if she would topple from her perch any moment, but for the steadying arm of the man walking beside her. He, with weary but open eyes, looked to me with the eagerness of soon-ending journey, as I stood at the porter's kiosk in the

great entry arch-way, there, of the khan. I'd been saying it all day, so without even thinking, without even waiting for him to speak, I shook my head in refusal, put my hands up and said, "There's no room – nothing – not anywhere, here."

He began to protest, to state his case. I cut him off and said, "Look!" His face slumped as his eyes caught sight of the swirling mass of people and animals behind me, filling the central courtyard round the well, the shouts of hawkers piercing the din of irritated, excitable voices.

"But, my wife," he said, his tone sagging, "she's ... she's about to give birth. It's starting – it won't be long." And as he spoke, the woman winced, flinching at her perch, the early stage of child-birth making itself known.

This is no place for a woman in labour, I thought. For even if she could get herself through that courtyard, and if one of the rooms were free, those cramped, close quarters with no light or ventilation apart from the door itself, would make sheer misery of that birth, with little or no privacy.

I made my decision. You have to make room! – room for a baby – whether you have room or not.

I called my wife, setting her to guard the door in my absence. Turning to the couple and their weary donkey, I motioned them to follow. Down the narrow streets we went to the outskirts of town where there was a stable, in a grotto, left unused for the moment because at that time of year the animals were in the fields. I knew the owners would be agreeable.

"Here," I said, "here's space to be quiet and sheltered. You'll be free of the crowds here."

I pointed them towards the elevated platform running along the inside wall of the grotto, a space normally used by those who had care of the animals. All was clean and fresh and empty, the outside air moving gently within. Nearby were mangers, filled with new straw, waiting the later return of sheep and cattle. The husband eased his wife from the donkey's tired back, supporting her as she crossed the stable. With groaning difficulty, she mounted the platform, and he himself laid his own worn cloak on the clean straw and helped her recline on this long-anticipated bed, her moan of satisfied contentment turning quickly to the renewed moaning of childbirth. I made a quick exit, leaving them to their privacy.

It was already time for the evening meal when I returned to the khan. All was confusion with open fires, and people jostling for position, and food spilt, and wine freely imbibed, and animals and children darting back and forth. I circulated through the chaos, issuing threats to maintain control. This was no place for a birth, nor yet again for a newborn child and nursing mother.

Several hours passed. Commotion calmed. Not till then did I remember the grotto, the straw, the bed, the labouring woman. Quickly I sent my wife to check on them there, to see how they fared, to offer womanly aid.

She returned almost immediately with news. She'd found there a healthy baby boy wrapped in the usual swaddling bands, but laid unusually in a manger for his bed. She came, borrowing extra rugs and cloaks, and then returning with some of the women to settle this new family more comfortably. Comings and goings continued sporadically for the next several hours as the word spread in the khan. Many of the women chose to visit the stable, as much for relief from the crowd as support for the mother.

And so the story would have ended – a babe finding its first lodging in the quiet of a stable. Unusual, but not memorable.

So it would have ended, but for the rumours of heaven.

Shortly before midnight two women returned from the stable saying they had been met by a band of shepherds. They'd come directly from the fields outside Bethlehem, but seemed to be convinced they were going to find a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. The women, puzzled, pointed them in the direction of the grotto and returned here to the khan.

Shortly after, another woman returned. She'd lingered at the stable and heard the shepherds' story. They'd said this birth, this baby, had been announced to them by an angel from heaven, an angel who declared joy above all joy, who named this town "David's town" and named this child "Saviour" and "Messiah" and "Lord". The angel himself had given the very identifying mark for the baby: swaddling wrapped, lying in a manger. Breathless now, this woman poured forth her story, then pressed on through the arch-way into the crowded interior of the khan, disturbing the quiet that was finally settling there.

But no matter, for at that very moment, up the road, hooting and hollering and running and shouting, at that time of the night, came the shepherds themselves, wide-eyed and grinning, confirming the stories, laughing out loud, praising God Almighty, spouting this incredible news which they themselves had experienced.

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And is the neighbourhood getting a little crowded? In this lodging alone we've got people from all over Israel. And just outside town, dominating the skyline, is Herod's mighty, lavish fortress, capable of lodging all the occupants of this khan in one single corner, a dwelling that's much too close for comfort, infrequent as his visits be.

Yet what, now, of the visit of this babe? What if it turns out a Saviour has been born? What if Messiah has come at last to little Bethlehem, to be ruler of all God's people? What if he who is Messiah and Lord has taken up lodgings here, ignoring Herod's lavish indulgence and taking instead a manger for his first bed?

What will it mean on earth itself if God, from heaven, visits?

What will the presence of such a King require?

And what will it mean for an innkeeper like me?