

THE KING

Learned visitors arrived in Bethlehem a little after the birth of Jesus. They paid homage to him as a future international ruler, who would bring peace to the whole world. They had learned of him through their studies of prophecy and the stars. Rich and powerful men, they attracted a great deal of interest in the town of Bethlehem. With them were many attendants. One of them, Linus, a trusted servant of Casper, struck up a friendship with an old shepherd, Seled. Seled had lived all his days in Bethlehem. His son who had taken over his farm was among the shepherds who first heard the announcement of Jesus' arrival. Seled himself had gone to the stable as soon as he had heard the second-hand news. He had made himself attentive to the needs of Mary - she reminded him of his own daughter - and when the family moved into rooms at the edge of the town, Seled made himself a shelter in the yard. That way he could be at hand if needed. It was there that the friendship with Linus had begun. Seled had been a rich source of information to the inquisitive young man from the East. But as always, there came a time when friends had to part.

"Wake up, my friend. Wake up" Linus shook the sleeping form gently, whispering urgently. Seled stirred, blinked in the light of Linus' lamp held above him. Suddenly the old man sat upright. With a note of horror he enquired, "What is it ? The child !"

"No !" Linus shook his head, and laid a reassuring hand on his friend's arm..

"I've come to say good-bye. My master has just wakened me. We're leaving at first light."

"Why the hurry. It's not that far to Jerusalem."

"We're not going to Jerusalem."

"But you said the king commanded...."

"That's just it," Linus interrupted him. "My master had a warning.. He must not trust Herod."

"Hush," warned the old man. "Shelters have bigger ears than houses." Linus lowered his voice. "They are afraid Herod will kill the child !"

The old man sighed. "It a puzzle to me. Wise men always seem to take the long way round to discover what we simple minded folk know all the time. I could have told them about Herod. He won't take chances with a rival. I'm surprise he hasn't called. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't slaughter the whole town to stop a threat to his throne. I told Joseph so only today. You get that child and his mother away, I said. He's a danger to you AND to us while you're here."

"But, if the child IS the Messiah..."

"Hush," Seled warned Linus again, as he cautiously searched the shadows. Keep your voice down. You can't say things like that."

"But," Linus resumed in a whisper. "If the child is Messiah, surely your God will keep him safe ! God will overthrow Herod and his forces. He will make this child strong. He'll give him a great army of men..."

"And what good would that do ? Seled interrupted him. More bloodshed; more armies; more weapons; more hatred.."

"But there's no other way," Linus argued. "Not out there in the real world. The world's history is made by wars and kings struggling for power."

"It is ?" The old man said no more.

"What do you mean ?" Linus corrected his rising voice. "Quickly. Tell me. I have to go now. Tell me what you mean."

"I've been thinking...and talking with Mary. I can't tell you all she said. But what if this child turned all our ideas of kingship on their heads? What if he didn't set any store by weapons; didn't value wealth; didn't care about position and personal power; but helped people to love one another !"

Linus couldn't help raising his voice in a snorting laugh. "What God would make his chosen king like that ?"

Seled looked at him in the yellow light. "You may laugh," he said in a solemn whisper. "But what God would let the Messiah - the Saviour - be born in a stable ?"