

The couple turned up on the doorstep well after the sun had gone down. They weren't peasants, but they weren't flush with money, either. He was leading the donkey on which his wife (at least I assumed she was his wife) sat. She was heavily pregnant.

I told them that we were booked out. They said that I was their last hope, but I said that it was this census, see, and business is business. Sometimes you have vacancies, and sometimes you don't. Can't be soft hearted about it.

But then the young girl groaned. Oh lord, I thought, the baby's coming. I only had one vacant space. Well, vacant apart from some livestock.

"There's a stable out the back. You can doss there. I won't charge you room rates." I felt generous. Besides which this would be a bonus, a bit of unexpected extra money.

I ushered them into the stable and left them there to settle in the best they could.

When I got back Miriam (the wife) came down from tending to some patrons. I told her about our new 'guests'.

She was furious.

"How can you do that to a woman about to give birth? You might have at least found some warm comer in the parlour for the poor lass."

It didn't matter what I said, I couldn't placate her. This census business wasn't going to last forever. Pretty soon we'd be back to scrounging what we could from passing trade, and every denarius counted. But she wasn't interested. That's the way it is with women. They don't understand business. But I'm the one who has to bring in the money.

"I'm going round there to see how she's doing." she said, and gathered up some clean rags and a bucket of hot water from the pot on the fire.

"Hey!" I said, "That's for our guests!"

"These people *are* our guests!" she shot back, and huffed out of the front door, leaving me to draw some extra water to replace what she took.

She came back a couple of hours later, looking all soft and maternal.

"It's a boy." she said, "and he's beautiful."

Oh please don't go all clucky on me, I thought, five is already enough.

"And by the way, they have visitors."

"Visitors!? Who?"

"Some shepherds from the hill country, with a couple of lambs."

"What! They can't just come swanning in, expecting me to give them warm place sleep and provide free fodder for their sheep!! Hay doesn't grow on trees, you know!"

Before she could reply I hurried out the door and round to the stable, only to be passed by three men leaving it.

"It's a boy, a beautiful boy. A king!" they called as they passed me, "The angels were right."

But I only had one thing on my mind. "Oil" I called after them, "You owe me some money! You can't just leave your sheep there and take off without paying!"

But they had gone (or should I say, skipped) past me and were talking and laughing so loudly that they didn't hear me.

And what was all that palaver about angels and a king? Ho!
Just wait 'til Herod hears about that one! That's dangerous talk!

I ducked through the door of the stable. Sure enough, there were the lambs scrounging hay from the floor. The donkey stood dozing in the corner, and the other animals quietly chewed their cud in their stalls. The main feed box, however, was in use. It had become a sort of cradle for the new born child. His mother sat next to it, crooning softly to the baby, who slept peacefully.

The man said, "Thank you for your kindness. It's lovely and warm in here."

All my bluster went out of me. I mean, how can you lay down the law when you're confronted with that?

I knelt by the manger to get a closer look at the baby, and to meet the soft eyes of his mother.

I thought, I'd better get out of here before I go clucky too.

It still took some time for me to tear myself away.

When I got back into the inn, Miriam was there, waiting.

It must have been the dreamy look in my eyes or something, because she simply nodded and said, "You too."

Since then I've thought a lot about that night, of angels - well, there was a soft glow about the stable - and of kingship. Could a king, like Herod for instance, do that to me - soften my heart like that? I doubt it. It took the innocence of a newborn child, the knowing eyes of his mother, and the generosity of his father to do that.

So the census came and went, business went back to usual, but now I don't seem to stress about it so much. I have the feeling that there will always be enough for us.

Oh yes - and number six is on the way.

The Innkeeper



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