

## Life in Ancient Rome, according to a carved Shell.

In a museum some years ago, I saw a large carved shell, the sort of thing people used to bring back from holidays in Italy, depicting a Roman couple buying a Cupid in a market. There were lots of Cupids in basket-work cages, looking very unhappy, grasping the bars of their cages, and in tears, and the Cupid-salesman is standing by, with a Roman couple pointing to one, and obviously saying, "We'll take this one." The idea for the carving was taken from a wall-painting in a room in Pompeii. Of course, they are properly called "putti", which is the Italian for "boy children", only these ones never grow up.

This idea raises all sorts of interesting questions in the wildly imaginative mind. To start with, the Cupid salesman had probably kidnapped his little captives in some bosky grove or sunny glade. If you study 18th century paintings, that is where they are often to be seen, raising a laurel wreath over the head of a victorious conqueror, or deftly draping the slumbering form of Venus, to only-just preserve her modesty. In fact, artists could only respectably depict undressed human bodies if the subject was educational, as in Classical myth, or uplifting, as in Old Testament stories, although some painters like Alma Tadema did rather push their luck.

However, having purchased one's Cupid, one takes it home, but then what? In a suburban Roman household the scope for appropriate employment must have been limited. No slumbering Venus or reclining hero. Perhaps the matronly lady and her spouse fancied themselves in that role, and were intending to throw a party and invite the guests to dress as heroes and goddesses, so that the new Cupid could flit around and amuse everyone accordingly, adding verisimilitude to the event. Or maybe he could just hover about and fill up the wine-goblets and pass the grapes. Perhaps a Cupid was a status symbol - "My dear, I never think a home is complete without one - " And anyway, how do you keep it from escaping? Bolt all the windows, and cage the poor little creature inbetween times? Or clip his wings like domestic poultry. It would be cruel, like having a captive wild bird. No, there would soon be a society set up by charitable ladies, The Society for the Freedom of Cupids, and Cupid-sellers would be out of business in no time, and the only place to see Cupids would be in the bosky grove or sunny glade, together with others of its kind, surrounding the elegantly posed goddesses or muscular heroes, as they were always intended to do.

Lucy Chubb

## THE INNKEEPER'S STORY.

Imagine the Inn at Bethlehem, some years after Jesus' birth. The Inn is quiet, and one traveller wants the Innkeeper to tell him his story. He buys a jug of wine, and pours some out for himself and the Innkeeper -

"Well, thank you, sir, just a small one. Oh, yes, I was going to tell you about that young family that stayed here at the time of the last census. We were packed out - you know how it can be - any festival at Jerusalem, or those wretched Romans and their census and you can't move for travellers. The whole village, anyone who had a bit of room to spare was full up. We couldn't have fitted anyone else in, let alone a young couple with the woman about to give birth any time. Don't get me wrong - I felt bad about it - I have a family myself, I wouldn't have wanted my wife to give birth just anywhere. So we did the best we could, we tidied up the stable downstairs, put clean straw down, and tied up the beasts. My wife went and fetched the village women who attend to these things, and the young woman had a fine little son in the night.

Oh, thank you, sir, just a drop. Well, that wasn't the end of it. In the early hours there was a commotion in the yard, and there was a bunch of scruffy shepherds. I ask you, leaving their sheep on the hills. They actually said they had seen an angel, actually lots of angels in the sky, telling them to come down to Bethlehem where they would find a baby who would be king of the Jews. I nearly set the dogs on them, but a couple of them were older men, looked a cut above the usual, so I told them where the baby was, and was going to go back to bed, only I thought I would look in on the young family. I went down to the stable, and there was the young mother and her husband, she was cradling the little baby, and there were all the shepherds, and the beasts standing, looking on, it seemed. It was remarkably quiet and - well, *reverent*, you could have said. And there was a sort of *light* about the baby - and not just the lamp hanging up. I couldn't understand it at all - between you and me, sir, I felt the tears on my face, and I couldn't say why. I just couldn't help it, I found myself kneeling down - it felt sort of *right* at the time.

Oh, I really shouldn't, but if you insist ..... Anyway, after a few days nearly all the people had gone, and the young family got a room in the village where they could lodge for a while, a lot more suitable than our old stable. And then another strange thing happened. Down into the village came a troupe of very grand people, not the sort you usually see round here, wise men, they were, from some faraway country, some said they were kings, even, but I don't know about that, with their camels and servants (who all wanted rooms, of course,) and they went to the house where the young family were staying, and brought gifts - gold, they said, and frankincense and myrrh, rather odd presents for a baby. They bowed down, these grand men, and worshipped this little baby! Who would have thought it! They stayed a few nights, my inn has never had such visitors! And then I heard that they had been up to the palace in Jerusalem and seen King Herod. He, apparently, wanted to see this baby who was said to be the future King of the Jews, and come to worship him. They didn't trust him an inch, and left and went back to their country a different way. I'm not at all surprised, I wouldn't trust him either - I mean, a future King of the Jews? He was bound to be suspicious. And I was right. The most awful things happened after that. Thank God my wife and children had gone to visit her parents - a whole troupe of Roman soldiers came rampaging round the village, killing all the little baby boys, even quite big babies, nearly two years old. You just can't imagine the screaming and weeping, and the blood, and distraught parents, it was just awful, I shall never forget it. I never really understood why, only that it was something to do with that young family that stayed in our stable. Well, they had left the week before, so they were safe, weren't they? But I can't get over it all, sir, I look back at what happened, and think about it again, and I can't help thinking that we haven't heard the last of that little baby."

Lucy Chubb.



## ELI'S STORY

"I am Eli, son of Eli, and I am the proprietor of the oldest and finest herbs and spices emporium in all Jerusalem. I can offer you the best and purest ingredients for all your requirements, and we, that is, my son Eli, and I, are patronised by the highest in the land. I want to tell you about a very curious thing that happened a little while ago.

Now, anyone will tell you that I am not a man given to wild fancies, but I have to confess that what occurred didn't make any sense at the time.

It was just after the Passover, and three ladies came to my shop late in the afternoon. Poor ladies, they were very, very distressed. They had witnessed a crucifixion, not suitable anyway for ladies to see, in my opinion. It was the son of one of the ladies - one of those radical hotheads, I supposed, but that makes no difference to the distress. They needed to anoint the body, in the usual way, and wanted to purchase our standard Burial Pack. We make these up in advance, all the myrrh and spices, wrapped ready for use, saves weighing out everything at the time. Anyway, the ladies paid, and left my shop.

Imagine my surprise when two days later they came back, asking for their money back, saying that the man had "risen from the dead." Well, I ask you, what was I to make of that? I suggested that perhaps he had not died at all, and had recovered in the cool of the tomb? Oh, no, not at all. They had gone to the tomb to anoint the body, and re-wrap it properly, to be confronted by angels, as well as the stone having been rolled back from the entrance. Angels, indeed! I never heard of such nonsense. What was wrong with my Burial Pack, I demanded? Absolutely nothing, replied the ladies, and handed it over, still all sealed up in its papyrus. And, what is more, the tears were all gone, they glowed with joy, and kept saying that he had risen from the dead. And, they said, he had appeared to their friends as well, perfectly well and fit, but with the wounds from the crucifixion still there. And he had eaten with them - ghosts can't do that, can they, they demanded.

Well, the Burial Pack was untouched, so I gave them back their money. And at the time I just shook my head, and called for a servant to make a soothing drink. But some time later, one of that man's friends came into my shop for some little thing he needed, and as it was quiet, we got talking. He was full of that man's appearances in Jerusalem and roundabout the area, and that he was actually the Son of God, and could save us from our sins, if we believed in him. I was struck by his sincerity, and asked him to come back, which he did. So now, months later, I and all my household believe in the name of Jesus, for that was His name. Blessed be the day his mother and her friends came to my shop."

Lucy Chubb.

## The Road to the Stable

My Master, Caspar the Astrologer, is a hard man; or, at least, he used to be. He used to beat me if I got any little thing wrong, when I helped him with his experiments. Some of his experiments were to find ways of making gold - endless incantations, calling up spirits, drawing symbols in the dust of the floor - and none of them worked. He became angry, shouting at me, screaming threats, throwing things at me. Then, one day, an old friend called Melchior, came to see him. He was a fellow astrologer who had become very interested in the movements of the heavens, and watched the heavenly bodies every night, observing how they sailed across the firmament. It is said that certain conjunctions of the stars foretell strange events here on earth. He showed us a curious thing - a particularly bright star - he couldn't understand what it might foretell. He persuaded my Master Caspar to go with him to a fellow astrologer to discuss this strange thing.

We took camels for a journey of a day, and found Balthazar, quite an old man, studying an ancient scroll. He greeted us, and I tucked myself into a corner of the room where I could listen to them. Balthazar said-

"I am glad we are together, I feel that something strange and wonderful is to happen." He picked up the scroll, "A conjunction of heavenly bodies is occurring - two stars are joined together in the firmament - this must surely foretell some great happening - a great battle, a death, or maybe a royal birth. " He rubbed his eyes "Some things seem unclear, but this great Star seems to indicate a journey to Jerusalem."

"Indeed," said Caspar, "why Jerusalem?" Balthazar picked up another scroll.

"It is written in this second scroll, by a certain Prophet, that a child shall be born in the town of Bethlehem, which is in the region of Jerusalem. This child will be great, a King, and would lead his people, and his birth would be marked by a star. Surely this is a journey we should take, to see him, to honour him with suitable gifts. Who will go with me?"

Melchior immediately agreed, but Caspar, my Master, thought it all nonsense.

"It is a long way, dangerous too, the hills are full of brigands. Surely this is fanciful imaginings?" Balthazar replied mildly,

" Well, old friend, give the matter some thought. A decision like this is no small matter. Let us meet again in the morning. There is a good inn in the village where you can sleep."

In the night my Master had a Vision. I was sleeping at the foot of his sleeping mat, so I saw and heard everything. A strange light shone in the room, and a Voice said;

"Proud Caspar, go on this great journey and you will see a Child who will rule in your heart, and save from destruction those who seek him."

Caspar stared at the strange light as it faded away, and began to weep, something I had never witnessed. He murmured "Lord, I hear you, I have been a bad man, show me a new path."

In the morning he told the others what he had seen and heard. They had also been visited in the night in different ways, but they all agreed to make the journey to Jerusalem, and began to make arrangements.

There would be men needed to accompany them; camels, provisions for the journey, weapons, gifts for the new King. The nature of the gifts was strange to me - gold I understood, incense, yes, but myrrh? That is used to embalm a dead body, and they meant to present it to a young King? I didn't understand.

In a few days we set off on our journey. How did we know which way to go? The star in the heavens which we had been observing seemed to grow brighter all the time, and beckoned us, so it seemed, in a westerly direction. The journey took a long time; weeks, I suppose, but the days passed like beads in a necklace - each like its predecessor. We saw no brigands, no wolves or lions, there was always an oasis when the water ran low. Villages were full of friendly folk, and at night, lying in our blankets on the sand, it seemed as though many soft feathered wings were surrounding and protecting us.

After many days we arrived at Jerusalem. We asked to see the King, and we were taken to see King Herod. I didn't understand, I thought the child we were to see was a King, how could there be two kings? Balthazar, Melchior and my Master, Caspar, were speaking with Herod. They told him that they had journeyed many days to see the new King. He didn't look very pleased, though he tried to hide it. He consulted his wise men, his palace Astrologers, and they told him that the child was to be born in Bethlehem.

"It is written," they told him, " that a child shall be born, King of the Jews." Herod said,

"Go and seek the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, so that I too may go and worship him."



Bethlehem was quite a small town, not a very grand sort of place, I gathered. Our audience with King Herod was over, and we were taken to a respectable inn for the night.

In the morning our camels were loaded up, and we left Jerusalem.

The road to Bethlehem was steep and winding, but we pressed on without any troubles, and soon we came to the entrance to the town. We asked at the Inn for directions to where the Child was, and plenty of people told us the way, and followed after us, it was quite a crowd that ended up at a house, not very grand. The Child had been born at the Inn, they said, in the stable - because everywhere was full up with visitors coming to register for taxes. My Master and his two companions came to the house quietly, leaving behind the camels and servants. I managed to creep in behind them, and saw everything there.

In the room was a lady, her husband, and a little baby, just a few weeks old. It was very quiet, and the lady picked up the child from the basket crib where he was lying. The three visitors came in and knelt down reverently- I was amazed, that my Master would kneel and worship a little Child! But I felt there was something wonderful - I knelt down too, I just had to, it was all so strange and - yes - holy. The gifts were presented, and the lady and her husband looked wonderingly, as if they, too, didn't quite understand what the gifts might signify. I didn't really hear what was said, my heart was so full, and presently we left the house. Nobody said anything, and we walked slowly away.

We stayed the night, meaning to return to Jerusalem the next day, to tell King Herod what we had seen. But my Master and his companions again had dreams, when an angel told them not to go to Jerusalem, as the King meant to do harm to the little Child, so in the morning we left the town, going not to Jerusalem, but home a different way.

In the years since all this took place, I have often looked back and wondered anew at what had happened. My master Caspar was a changed man. He never beat me, and spoke kindly to me, asking my opinion about the experiments we did. He never called up spirits again, and he gave quite generously to the poor of the town. My master is an old man now, and is at peace with God - he has released me from slavery, but I still serve him - where else would I go? The memory of that Child and His mother stays with me, and the journey we made which changed everything.