

Bethly Hen

I may not look it now, my little cuddly chicks, but there was a time when I nearly became as rich the richest prince of the land.

It was midwinter. Not that it was really very cold, except out in the hills above my village. My village is Bethly. Well, I say that but really I live on a tiny little farm just outside of the tiny little village of Bayt Allah in Judah, just to the west of Jerusalem. Not many people have heard of it. And nobody has heard of my farm.

Well, there we were, a midwinter day, not much happening, scratching around in the dirt as usual. My farm lies at the end of a dirt track, off a slightly wider dirt track leading down to the village and no farther.

It was a bit strange, though. Since the night before, this big bright star seemed to be hung in the sky right above our farm. Lancelot, the cockerel, had remarked on it when he came back in for breakfast after greeting the dawn. 'Big star out there,' he said. 'Won't go away. Don't like it.' Lance shook his feathers and grouched for the rest of the morning. When it was warmer, I went out and sure enough, although the sun was up and shining weakly, there was this huge bright star right above the shed. Felt as though someone was watching you all the time.

I was the only hen there at the time. Our farmer had taken the rest of the girls down to the market the week before. I was left behind because I was good at laying eggs. Always have been, my chicks, although I'm getting a bit old for it now. Lance was no good for anything except waking up the farm each morning, so he never went to market.

Well, I scratched about a bit and then I heard a bit of a commotion out on the track. I looked up and saw the most startling sight. Three tall men in the most colourful of clothes were riding up the track on huge horses. Of course, I ran and hid in the shed, and Lance poked his nose out and told me what was happening.

The three tall men rode up to the farmhouse and halted. One of them pointed up to the star above and nodded to his companions. Each man was accompanied by two servants, on mules, and they had huge amounts of baggage. One of the servants roused my mistress, who was terrified out of her wits, poor thing, and spoke to her. Eventually, she pointed towards the hen-house.

I must admit I was terrified when they dismounted and came over towards the shed. Lance, the dear man, set up a dreadful crowing and scuffling, but it did not put them off one bit. The servant knocked on the door.

"Come out, o Hen!", he called in a foreign accent, "We desire an audience with you!"

I was all a-tremble, my little chicks, I can tell you. But there was nothing else for it. I gave my feathers a good preening, dusted myself down and stepped outside into the yard. Imagine my surprise when the fine gentlemen all fell down on their knees and greeted me with their noses touching the ground.

"O Hen of Bethly," said one of them, the tallest one with a long black beard and whiskers fit for a king, "O Bethly Hen, we greet you. We have come from far in the east to seek out a new-born child, and Herod, King of this land

has told us that you will bring us to him. May your feathers shine bright, may your eggs be large and bounteous, may your chickens live long in your home!" Well, you can imagine, chickadees - I was a bit taken aback.

"Greetings, great men of the east, but I fear we have no children here, and no babies at all."

The three richly-dressed men, still on their knees, looked puzzled. They talked amongst themselves in a language I could not understand. Their servants amused themselves by picking oranges from my mistress' tree.

Finally the tallest of them got to his feet and turned again to me. "But the star that is risen is directly above this place. We are famous astrologers in our land, far to the east, and this star tells us that a child is born to be King of the Jews. This star above us tells us he is here, on this spot."

We all looked up at the star. And even as we looked, we saw the star moving slowly towards the south-east, over the hills towards Bethlehem and Solomon's Pools.

This upset the three Wise Men from the east.

"What is the meaning of this, Zakopak?" demanded the tallest one in a loud voice, turning to the oldest astrologer.

"Eh? What? Speak louder, Ziggurat!" said the oldest astrologer, cupping his hand behind his ear. "What's happening - is the child not here?"

"I said, what is the meaning of this, Zakopak?" shouted Ziggurat in the old man's ear. "What was it that King Herod said to you in Jerusalem last night?"

"King Herod? Oh, he said that the child was to be found with the Bethly Hen in Judah. Oh yes, he did. Now, where did I pack the frankincense - Ahmed, where is the frankincense?"

The astrologer named Ziggurat turned to the smallest and youngest man from the east. "Zolophat, you have a chart of the lands hereabouts - what other places are there south and east of here?"

Zolophat took out a great roll of parchment and the two wise men bent their heads over it. Meanwhile, Zakopak had unearthed a small package which, my dear little chicks, gave off the sweetest scent you ever smelled in your life. Your little noses would wrinkle at the very memory of it. The kind old man showed it to me and the two of us just breathed in the sweet aroma.

"My friends have got gold and myrrh in their packages, my dear," he whispered to me, "Gifts for you and the child, you know." I thought my wildest dreams were about to come true.

At length, Ziggurat turned angrily towards Zakopak.

"You old goat, Zakopak!" he shouted, brandishing the parchment. "It was Bethlehem, the town of *BETHLEHEM* King Herod told you about, not some stupid little hen in Bethly!"

I found his tone quite offensive. So did dear old Zakopak. He sadly put away the frankincense, tickled me on my head and climbed aboard his horse. Then the three of them, and their servants, rode off down the track again, following the bright star into the south-east, leaving behind only the scent of the incense and the orange peel discarded in the dust. I don't know what happened to them after that - didn't hear anything more. Me and Lance, we just got on with our lives.

