

The Inn

by Sir Knight Paul Fuhrmann

It is such a busy time; I have hardly had any rest at all. It seems that there's always an angry guest when a room isn't clean or an irritable guest when the food isn't ready on time. There are constant interruptions; the stable boy wants money for feed while the cook argues with me about the next meal, and the maid complains because the well is so far away. Not a minute's rest, I tell you. Arrogant Roman soldiers come in and take all they want. "See the quartermaster for your pay." they tell me. How do you argue with a man carrying a sword? Treat them poorly, and more come. Treat them well, and more come. What's a poor innkeeper to do?

This wasn't my original plan, I'll have you know. This was supposed to be ... well...less work and more pay. The guests make more work and the tax man takes the pay. He even eats my food and then collects. Why can't he come here after he eats somewhere else, I'd like to know. Feed him for free and then pay him, and he's not even a relative; by relatives, I'd expect to be treated like this. I tell you, the only thing worse than a hungry publican is a visiting brother-in-law with a wife and five kids.

Been to Joppa? Have I been to Joppa you want to know? I was born and raised in Joppa, the son of a seafaring man. How I loved the sea. Sometimes I'd just sit on the shore listening to the cries of soaring gulls and the sighing of the surf. My heart would leap at the first sight of the sails on my father's returning ship. Ah, the stories he could tell - the wonders he had seen - they fired my imagination. Wonders of Greece and Rome and Egypt; he knew them all. He had even once seen a King! Then one terrible night we received word that his ship had gone down with all hands. I became, at thirteen, the man of the house, and the night demons began frequent visits.

No dreams of adventure for me, no sir! My uncle bound me as a shipbuilder's apprentice and bound my life to Joppa. I'm not sure which is harder work, building ships by day or fighting demons by night. "Am I good enough, big enough, fast enough, strong enough?" they haunt me. "You could do more; you must do more!" they taunt me.

We built strong ships for the King, and we survived. When you work for the King, the tax man sometimes forgets to visit you, and soldiers from Rome have no interest in Jewish ships except the ones bearing incoming cargo. It's not a good life, but it's a life. Then there was this accident at the shipyard; my body could no longer work to build great ships. "Come," my uncle says, "at the town of your fathers there is an inn for sale. Others can work for you, and your old age will be more comfortable." So by the unlucky slip of a rope, I became an innkeeper.

In good times, there are probably worse places than this isolated village but not many, and these times are not good times.

Each day of summer, the sun sears the parched ground almost to lifelessness as trees and grass and crops fight to survive. Even the breezes at night are warm upon your face, so you look forward to winter. Then cold freezes your very bones and turns all the earth to stone. Then you pray for summer. So it goes. This village seems to be an unwelcome intruder upon an unyielding land. There is never enough meal, never enough firewood, never enough water, and always there are hungry, tired soldiers. I do not sleep at night.

As the yoke is to the ox, so Rome is to Israel, an ever demanding and insistent burden. Caesar is not content just to tax us. He orders that we are all to be counted; he wants to know how many of us there are to pay, so we must all go to the city of our fathers and be enrolled. It's good for business, because I'll have a lot of guests, but bad for me because the publican will demand more. "Full house again this night?" he wants to know. He just holds out his hand, and I pay.

My days and nights; now, they seem to rush together. Get food; argue with the cook. Get water; argue with the maid. Try to find hay and straw; argue with the stable boy who is arguing with the maid who is arguing with the cook who is arguing with me. The demons rage, and I cannot sleep at night.

Then, one evening, a young man comes to me with pleading eyes. "Sir," he says, "have you any room? We have traveled far, and my wife is with child. We have no place to stay."

"I have no rooms," I say. "I may sleep in the stable myself tonight, but the roof leaks."

"I'll fix the roof," he says. "I am a carpenter." From the look of him, the stable is all he can afford.

"Stay in my stable as long as you like." I tell him. I can't afford to fix the roof any other way, anyhow.

So he leads a gaunt burro and its frail passenger from the cold into the stable, and I wearily drag my body to the inn. The maid is still in the kitchen as I sit by the fire to warm myself. "Is there any dinner left?" I want to know. She gives me a small piece of bread, a piece of meat in broth, and a small cup of wine. "This is all," she replies, "until tomorrow."

I know I'm too tired to eat but not tired enough to sleep. I give back to her the meager meal. "There is a young man with his wife staying in the stable tonight." I tell her. "Give this to him, and see if you can help the woman be comfortable."

Warmth from the fire draws my eyes closed for a lingering moment. When I awaken, the maid is gone. I close my eyes again, wishing to sleep but not to dream. My eyes search the glowing coals in the hearth. I must have slept for a very long time, I think, for the fire is almost out, but as usual, I am not rested.

Every part of me resists arising, but I must attend to my latest guests, so I pass through the courtyard to the stable. As I enter, all is in darkness but for a soft and unexplained

glow in one remote corner of the stable. I find there the man and woman sleeping and a newborn baby in the manger nearby. There is no sound except soft murmurs from the sleeping animals. There is no reason for the light; yet in my wonder I do not question it.

My fingers touch rough wood and soft straw as I kneel beside the child. "Another poor taxpayer." I think. "Caesar has one more to carry the glorious burden of Rome. Perhaps his share will lessen ours."

"Why is this child not crying?" I wonder. "In this day and age, all children cry until they are ten, and then they just cry on the inside."

One corner of his blanket has fallen away from the precious child. I reach to put it on him again; and he awakens. He reaches toward me and his tiny hand grasps my finger. He looks into my eyes, and a peace I have never known before comes to my heart and quiets the restlessness within my whole being. He smiles, releases his grasp, and falls asleep.

The soldiers still come. The publican still comes. My brother-in-law and his family still come, but I can sleep at night, for I am no longer afraid.

"The Inn" is copyrighted by Sir Knight Paul D. Fuhrmann and is used with his permission. Sir Knight Fuhrmann is a member of Columbia Commandery No. 22 in Sturgis, Michigan but resides in Missouri and can be reached at pdfbari@aol.com.

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