

They were journeying with speed for they were fleeing from Judea where the martyred children's blood was flowing in crimson torrents. The profound gloom of the forest, the bleak solitude and the peals of thunder were less terrible to them than the neighborhood of cities in which the murderous steel of Herod's emissaries threatened the Babe now peacefully asleep.

They hurried on, anxious that when the morrow's sun arose, it might see them far from that inhospitable land.

Still they hurried on. . . . when behold, two men springing from the border of the wood, stood threateningly before them, blocking the way.

They were highway robbers who, during the night, lie in wait for defenceless travellers, stripping them of the gold or merchandise they carry and releasing them only on receiving a heavy ransom.

Alas! Joseph the patriarch and Mary were poor. They owned neither gold nor jewels. Their sole treasure was the Infant God whom they were carrying over mountains and deserts towards the Egyptian land to hide Him from the Tetrack's jealous fury.

With suppliant gestures they besought the brigands to let them go their way. All in vain. The infant in Mary's arms had been recognised as the new-born Child of Bethlehem, the mysterious Babe who, lying on straw in the manger of a wretched stable, received the adoration of the Chaldean Shepherds and the Eastern Kings. They knew that His parents received rich gifts, a casket of gold and precious perfumes, from the Maji. Their greed was enkindled by this knowledge and they dragged the travellers through narrow forest by-ways to a deep cavern, their lurking place by day, and in which, far out of reach, they hoarded the accumulated fruit of their rapine.

Nothing moved these pitiless men, not even Joseph's petitions nor the mother's tears. Crime had long since hardened Gesmas and Dismas, steeling their hearts to all feelings of mercy.

Or, reaching their haunt, they lit torches and, roughly thrusting aside the aged Joseph who vainly tried to interpose, they tore the Child from His Mother's arms.