

Poetry.

CHRIST IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE.

A wreath of glory circles still his head—
And yet he kneels—his face is pale—
Confronted with more than human agony...

THE FIRST GOOD FRIDAY.

(BY THE REV. R. J. MACDONALD.)

It chanced on a Friday of the month of April,
In the year of our Lord thirty-three, that an aged man
Was slowly ascending the hill, on the ridge of which
The city of Bethlehem is situated.

In particular he looked with fond intensity upon
A fair green meadow, situated beneath the rocky terraces
Of the city, and in which several groups of shepherds
Were engaged in their quiet and gentle occupation.

It was even so, Isaac the Bethlehemite, after an
Absence of more than thirty years in the far East,
Was returning to the City of King David, where his first
And happiest years had been spent.

One thing the pilgrim specially noted, and that was,
The unusual quiet which pervaded the scene, more
Immediately in his vicinity. The thoroughfares leading
To Bethlehem were almost deserted—no appearance of
Life being presented, save by the guard, who stood listlessly
Leaning on their spears, or burrowing their mail.

From the eminence on which he stood, he could
Descry vast multitudes of people thronging towards
Jerusalem. He knew, indeed, that it was the season
Of the Passover, when the holy City was wont to receive
Many visitors, from all quarters of the world; but he
Never remembered on any former occurrence of the
Festival, to have seen such hosts of devotees bound
For the seat of Jehovah's sacred Temple.

Standing thus in thoughtful mood, he was startled
By a deep and sorrow-laden groan—expressive of some
Astonishing degree of misery, if not of absolute despair.
On looking round to the quarter from whence the sound
Proceeded, he beheld a sight which at once excited
His wonder and compassion.

For a season, Isaac was filled with no small alarm
At the sight of this mysterious being, conceiving that
Perchance he might be one of those strangely afflicted
Demons that so common in Palestine, and who, in
Their hours of special possession, frequently wrought
Sore harm to those who lighted upon their track.

Gazing vacantly on the clear, blue sky, that
Erewhile spoke aloud the thoughts which like sulphurous
Clouds flitted about the troubled horizon of his soul.
"O," he exclaimed, "the Sadducee was right! The soul
Is mortal, and the bodily resurrection a dotting dream.
My Judith! never more can I behold thy liquid
Black eye—never more be thrilled with thy smile,
Discouraging love unpeaking. And my darling Benjamin—
My noble child, what art thou but a lovely
Dead, fled and vanished for ever. Never again will
Thou nestle thy fair silken-haired head in my bosom,
Nor slip my name in staggering half-uttered words,
More musical by far than the most cunningly played
Delicium. Ye have vanished, and for ever, like a
Streak of morning mist—like a foam-bell in the mountain
Stream. Once, indeed, I thought differently.
'Time was, when I cherished the hope, that in another
State of existence I would meet both of you again.
But Caiaphas the Sadducee taught me my error, and
Convinced me that there is no resurrection, neither
Angel nor spirit. Oh! cursed be the knowledge which
He bestowed upon me! Dream as it was, it was a
Bright and soothing dream; and since it was dispelled,
Life to me has been nothing save a simoom-blown
Desert—a dry and thirsty land, wherein is no water."
And with that the soul-sick one threw himself upon
His face and dug his nails the two funereal mounds,
Between which he writhed like a crushed and convulsed
Snake.

Isaac could not behold unmoved this pitiable
Abandonment of grief. Approaching the sufferer, he spoke
To him in soothing tones. With gentle hand he raised
him from the hot and scorching earth; and tenderly
he wiped the sweat from his forehead, and the
dust-mingled foam from his parched and quivering lips.

"Kind stranger! if thou hadst known my Judith
and our child, you would not wonder at the agony
which at times masters me, as it has done even now.
But I will not essay to describe their peerless beauty,
or my surpassing happiness. As well might I attempt
to describe to you the scent of a rare and fragrant
flower, the odour of which you never experienced.

"It is now more than thirty years since, with my
loved and lost ones, I dwelt in a cottage which stood
on yonder grassy mound. Not a care disturbed our
quiet days; not an anxious thought mared the
sabbaths of our peaceful nights. Sorrows was a strange
tale to us. Every new sun-rise brought fresh sources
of unadulterated delight.

"Of passing events we knew almost nothing.
Seldom did I visit either Jerusalem or Bethlehem, and
then only on pressing and unavoidable occasions.
My business despatched, I was too eager to return to
my Paradise, to bestow any attention upon the
things which interested and engrossed the men of active life.
On one occasion, I remember, we heard tidings of a
strange and mysterious child which had been born
in our city, and to visit which certain sages had come
a long and toilsome journey. But we had ourselves
a babe, fairer, we deemed, than ever had sprung from

the lions of our father Aviam; and Judith and myself
had no love to lavish upon any other, though it had
been the son of the Imperial Caesar himself. Alas!
our happy dream was soon to be dispelled for ever—
and oh, how sharply and how sternly!

"One bright morning I sat with my loved ones in
the porch of our dear cottage. Oppressed with a
satiety of happiness, I lay with my head reclining upon
a sally of happiness, I lay with my head reclining upon
the kindly bosom of my gentle Judith; and as our
little Benjamin sported and frolicked around us, we
speculated upon his future destiny and lot in life.
We fashioned out for him a stirring and honourable
career, and anticipated the time when by his virtue
and prowess, he would add new fame to the tribe of
his fathers.

"Two men—soldiers of Herod the King—came
upon us, or ever we were aware of their advent.
Fatigued with walking in the heat of noon-day, they
craved our hospitality, which was at once conceded,
as no stranger was ever turned faint and hunger-
stricken from our door. After they had partaken of
a repast, the sterner looking of the twin cast his eye
upon our precious boy; and with a sinister expression,
which his mother was not to see, he quitted the house
of his mother what might be his age. His comrade, who
seemed to be of a more gentle spirit, made on this a
significant sign to my Judith, and prompting her, as it
were, said, 'Of a surety, the child is more than two
years old.' But my loved one, with all the eager pride
of a mother, exclaimed, 'indeed, you are in error. Our
Benjamin hath not yet reached his eighteenth month.
Is he not, good sir, a noble boy for his age?'

"No sooner had she thus spoken, than both the
armed men arose, the kinder one with a deep and
heavy sigh, and told a tale which was almost incom-
prehensible on account of its surpassing horror. Even
at this distant period, I can scarce realize the demon-
iac bitterness which it embodied. Suffice it to say,
that the mercenaries informed us, that our only child—
our silken-haired, glad-eyed Benjamin—was doomed to
death by decree of the infernal Herod. And, oh! what
madness to a mother! that the terrification of his age
had been the warrant of his execution! Had my
Judith been silent as to the period of his birth, she
would have saved our blessed babe!

"Nothing do I remember of what then took place.
When my recollection returned, I found myself lying
over the corpse of my Judith and my Benjamin—for
the mother had been slain in striving to shield her
first-born from destruction. I was alone in that once
happy, gleesome chamber, and the cold night wind,
as it stirred my moist hair, sounded as if the destroyer
death were whispering in my ear that his victory was
full and complete. I writhed under his terrible sting,
and crouched slave-like before the wheels of his tri-
umphal chariot.

"For a season, I cherished the hope that the patri-
arch Job spoke truth, when he declared that after
worms destroyed the body it should live again, and
that with the same eyes which we had gazed upon
the sun and moon, we should see our Father God,
and each other. To the doctrine—faintly held, it
is true—of a resurrection of the human frame I
clung as a drowning man clings to a straw; and I
lived in hope that after this chequered life, I should
once more meet and embrace my lost ones in that
bright land, where sorrow and sighing are strange and
unknown words!

"My relative Caiaphas, the present High Priest of
the Jews, strove to rouse me from my melancholy
torment, as he termed it. He told me that the idea of
a future state was a fond imagination—a dreamy
fable; that angels and spirits were but the creatures
of an idle fancy; and that our wisdom lay in making
the most of the present moment. 'Eat, drink, and
be merry,' he said; 'everything else is vainly and
folly.'

"Cunning and plausible were the arguments which
he brought forward to prove his position. They con-
vinced me, but destroyed my slender remains of hope
and comfort. The future became midnight—the
present was left as dark and chill as ever. Could I
take pleasure in the feast or the revel? The bloody
visages of my murdered ones glared upon me, through
the vine-leaves which decorated the Sadducee's
sensual bowl. I flew from the converse of my kind as
from a pestilence; and here have I dwelt between
these two graves, without a motive and without a hope
—without a comfort and heart-sick of life and yet deriving
no comfort from the anticipation of a brighter world
beyond the tomb."

"With tender pity, Isaac pressed the clammy hand
of the hapless recluse, and his eye glistened as if
with the consciousness that he could impart to him
fitting and substantial consolation.

"You tell me that you were taught to hold that
there is no hereafter, and that spirits and angels are
but dreams, or delusions of the designing! I credit it
not, thou man of bereavement! Of all the spots on
the round world this is not the one for cherishing
such gloomy and chilling dogmas! Of all God's
creatures, an unbelieving Jew is the most, so to speak,
seeing that his nation has been nursed, so to speak,
in the wonders and mysteries of the unseen and
eternal state!

ing ones floated upon the ocean of light, stretching
upwards and backwards, till the brain was dazzled and
crushed almost, with the impression of infinite number
and limitless, extent. Thus ran their concerted song,
so mighty in its swell that it must have been heard in
the remotest planet and star: 'Glory to God in the
highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.'
And then the sounds died away, like the gentle sighing
of a summer's breeze, which scarce ruffles the
leaf of the timid aspen, and all was still and lone some
as before.

"So soon as we were capable of speech, we whis-
pered solemnly to each other, 'Let us now go even
unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to
pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.' And
coming with haste to Bethlehem, we were guided by
a star-like meteor, which, as it were, beckoned us on,
till we came to the stable of the principal caravanserai.
There we found a goodly young child, lying in a
manger, with his father and mother as his sole attendants,
and meanly attired in the scanty rags of penury. Ere
we could say aught, the coming footsteps of other
visitors were heard, and presently there entered a
company of Magi—Eastern Kings, who had come
from their distant dominions to do homage to this
humbly-cradled infant. Grave and thoughtful men
they were, and from their conversation I gathered
that it had been revealed to them by the Eternal, that
in that simple babe dwelt all the fulness of the God-
head bodily.

"It will not interest you to be told, how I agreed
to accompany one of these devout princes to his own
land, or how I fared in that foreign region. Enough
to say that my patron some months ago was gathered
to his fathers, and on his death-bed charged me to
return to Judea, as the completion of the Messiah's
work was about to take place; and it beloved me, as
one favoured by Heaven, to be present at Jerusalem
on the coming Pentecost.

"Thus, oh mourning one, you perceive how great
your error, how entire your delusion as regards the
future state of being! No angel—no spirit? The
air teems with them. Not a sun-beam but bears
legions of them on some mission of mercy or judg-
ment."

Sadoc, the solitary, who had listened with
attention to the pilgrim's narration, was for a while
absorbed in thought; and it seemed as if the cloud of
despair was beginning to pass away from his care-
frowned brow. But anon he sunk back into his
pristine gloom, and wrung his hands as despondingly as
ever. "No shepherd," he said, "your words bring
me no comfort. Something of the event which you
describe I have heard before, but I cannot regard it
as aught save a delusion or a dream. At any rate,
presuming the sight to be real, it proves nothing to
me as to the resurrection of Adam's children. Oh no!
no! There is—there can be no hope for me, the
most miserable of men. My slain ones, never more
shall I behold you!—never more hear the gentle tones
of your foreboding voices! My lot may indeed
be called MARE, for it is bitter exceedingly."

"At this moment the warders on the towers of Beth-
lehem proclaimed the sixth hour.

Ere the sound of their voices had died away, it be-
came darker than the darkest midnight; like that
which plagued the Egyptian oppressors, the gloom
might be said to be felt, so dismal, so profoundly sable
the pall which was drawn over the whole expanse of
heaven. Thunder, too, of a deeper bass than ever
before had been uttered, rolled and crashed in incessant
peals. It seemed as if the elements had been
induced with reason, and were in frenzied voice protest-
ing against some unheard-of and intolerable deed of
wickedness and blasphemy. Over Jerusalem forked
bolts of lightning hissed and darted like serpents ejected
from the pit of perdition, as if attracted by some horrid
fascination situated in that city. In particular they
seemed to concentrate upon the spot where stood the
Temple of the God of Israel; and the earth shaked in
its mighty excitement, and reeled, and heaved,
and tossed, as if its foundations rested upon the waves
of a tempest-vexed sea.

"In the midst of this mysterious and soul-awing
tumult, a soft, violet-tinted light began gradually
to pervade the spot where stood the pilgrim shepherd
and the sorrow-blighted Sadoc. As it increased, it
was evident that a change had occurred in the locality
during the reign of darkness. The twin graves were
open, the fresh earth being scattered around; and the
huge stones which had covered them lying at some
distance, as if removed by some gigantic power. And
closely adjoining these disturbed mansions of mor-
tality, there stood two forms clothed in the livery
of the dead. One of them was a female, and the other
a child, who grasped her hand and looked fearfully
and confidently in her face, undismayed by the wild
war of the elements which raged around.

"But who could describe the surpassing beauty, not
so much of feature as of expression, which beamed
in the visages of that meek and silent pair? Its main
characteristic was peace—peace, passing all under-
standing—peace, such as the cold, selfish world could
never give, nor with all its manifold vicissitudes,
ever take away.

Isaac was the first to mark this addition to their
company, and he silently directed the attention of
Sadoc to the strangers. Slowly and listlessly did
the heart-sick hermit turn himself round; but no sooner
did he behold the new-come pair, than it seemed
as if an electric fluid had pervaded his whole frame.
Every muscle quivered, every vein swelled, every par-
ticular hair stood stiff and rigid. He drew his breath
in laboured, convulsive sobs, and his eyes seemed
glazed by the absorbing intensity of the glare with
which he regarded the gentle, saintly group before
him. One smile from them—a smile concentrating
the rich happiness of years, brightened upon the dark
cold places of his heart. His ears thrilled with the
long unheard words, "Husband—Father; and with
a gasping, choking exclamation, "My Judith—my
Benjamin!" he staggered forward, and embraced them
both in one mighty, wild, hysterical embrace. The
recollection of more than thirty dark years of sorrow
and despair was in one moment obliterated; their agonies
were forgotten, like the fitful dream of a single night.

"Oh Sadoc, dearest! come on, and stay not to con-
verse of such matters. Have we not a gladness eter-
nally before us? The city must be reached before the
Ninth Hour. Legions of Angels are flocking thither,
even as I am now speaking."

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