

OUR BOYS AND GIRLS.

THE ROSE-CROWNED KING.

A Legend of Nazareth.

It was evening, and the setting sun dipped gloriously into the Mediterranean behind Mount Carmel, tipping its hoary summit with gold. The slopes of this mountain of Mount Tabor in another direction were already tinged with the purple shade of evening, and in the many small valleys of this hilly country was the gathering darkness; yet from the plateau upon which Nazareth stands the quiet, simple folk of that town could see in the distance, across the valley of Jezreel, an expanse of the great sea all ablaze in its evening golden glory. Close at hand myriads of bright hued insects made the summer haze vibrate with the motion of their untiring wings.

The white flat-roofed houses of Nazareth appeared pink in the evening sunset, and the red pomegranate blossoms in the gardens grew more brilliant as they caught the slanting rays and presented to the eyes and appearance of many luminous orbs. The beauty of these rich flowers and of their companion roses was heightened by their dark background of olives and palm trees which covered the valleys and even the lower hills in the neighborhood. All was motionless in the evening air, and no sound was heard save the hum of the insects, the tinkling of a distant sheep-bell or an occasional peal of merry laughter of some happy boys who were at play in an open space near the village.

The workers of Nazareth were resting from the labors of the day, and many sat before their doors to enjoy the cool breezes that came from the sea. Little, graceful maidens, carrying water pots on their heads, noiselessly passed on their way to and from the common well of the town, and with these exceptions there was no sign of animation on the streets, and to the common observer nothing had occurred to disturb the usual quiet of the place.

In two houses, however, of the peaceful town there was more than ordinary activity, arising from the pleasant duties of hospitality. Simple and lowly, and even despised, as these Nazarenes were, they were, nevertheless, remarkable throughout all Galilee for the warmth of the welcome they always extended to their guests and for the willingness with which they entertained strangers who chanced to come among them.

This cordiality was manifested in no small degree in a dwelling that stood a little apart from the cluster of buildings that formed the town. It was a small and tumble house, having only a few rooms. About it could be seen the marks of toil; shavings and pieces of wood were lying around the ground which told a stranger that the dweller therein was a worker in wood. It was the home of Joseph, the carpenter.

All signs of labor had on this day been early laid aside, and Joseph and Mary were busy in making comfortable and attending to the wants of two guests who had honored their dwelling with a visit. No less a personage than a priest of the temple at Jerusalem was Joseph's guest. The venerable Zachary, with Elizabeth, his wife, had come on a visit of charity to Mary and Joseph. Old as they were, they had travelled a distance of nearly seventy miles through the hill country of Judea, Samaria and Galilee to see once more ere they were gathered to their fathers that wonderful Child whom Zachary two years before had seen disputing with marvelous wisdom amid the learned men of Israel at the temple porch in Jerusalem. The remembrance of this event had remained with him ever since. It had become a part of his life, and was ever present with him in his waking moments and filled his dreams at night, and he longed ere his dust was laid in the grave to see and know more of this wonderful Being whom he recognized as the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

Already Joseph, according to the custom of the East, had brought water for the old man's feet and, notwithstanding his guest's protestations, had washed them himself, and now the two men were sitting outside of the house engaged in quiet conversation, while Mary was entertaining Elizabeth in a no less kindly manner within doors.

In another house not a stone's throw away other scenes of hospitality were also being enacted. That afternoon Zabdai, from the little fishing town of Bethsaida, had brought his wife, Salome, and their two sons, James and John, on a visit of friendship to Geddiel Sod, who was a relative of his wife. The host in this case was a rich farmer, owning more flocks and herds than any one else in this region. His household consisted of Miriam, his wife, and three sons, Subael, Abner and Eazi, together with numerous men and maid servants.

A more sumptuous meal had been prepared for these visitors than that offered to Zachary and Elizabeth. A lamb had been killed to celebrate the event, and delicious grapes, apples and citrons graced the board. Moreover, the master of the house was no longer a strict Nazarene, and therefore did not hesitate to place on his table rich wines, cooled in snow, which had been preserved in huge boxes buried underground.

With this display there was to be observed slight traces of ostentation, and both Zabdai, or Zabdoo, and his wife Salome, as the feast progressed, were conscious of being slightly patronized. James and John were too young to perceive this, and they enjoyed the good things that Geddiel Sod set before them as only boys can. James was

nearly sixteen and his brother John was two years younger, and both were already learning the trade of their father, a fisherman on the Lake of Tiberias. Their browned faces and hands told but too much in the open air. They allowed their locks to grow long, after the Jewish fashion, while the other three boys affected a Roman custom of cutting the hair short, as did their father, much to the grief of his fellow-townsmen, who regarded him as one of the leading men of the place, but deplored the fact that he had departed from the traditions of their forefathers and had ceased to be a strict follower of their sect.

After the meal was over the five boys went out to the plateau, where most of the children of the town were accustomed to gather on the summer evenings, and it was their custom that could be heard on the hillside where Joseph and Zachary were resting. The two elderly men had now been sitting for some time in silence, quietly enjoying each other's company with that satisfaction that does not seek to find expression in words, when suddenly Zachary started at the beautiful vision presented to him.

Standing under the arch of the doorway, with the fading light of evening shining full upon him, was a most beautiful youth of fourteen years. He had just returned from an errand upon which Joseph had sent him before his guests had arrived. His gold brown hair was parted in the centre and fell in long waves, just reaching the shoulders. The high and noble forehead shone in the light like polished marble. His large, mild but penetrating eyes were overarched with rich eyebrows, and the eyes themselves spoke of meekness, ardor and love. The nose was straight and rather long, the lips exquisitely formed, with the redness of health. The chin was moulded into perfect masculine grace, and the partially exposed neck enhanced the noble poise of the head. The outer garment was woven of one piece and reached to the ground.

At the moment that Zachary saw him there was a glow on his countenance which seemed to light up all his features. The last traces of tears were found in his eyes, and it seemed evident that he had just risen from the evening prayer.

The Nazarene mothers—those women whose beauty had made them famous even as far distant as Rome—admitted that the son of the carpenter, Joseph, surpassed their own children in beauty and conceded to him a winning grace they failed to find in their own. To-day he seemed more beautiful than ever, even to Joseph, for the usually calm and placid face was brightened with pleasurable emotions caused by the visit of Elizabeth and of the priest Zachary.

The youth, stood silently behind Joseph's seat, with his arms folded over his breast, in an attitude of deepest respect towards the two men. The old man was awed. His whole being thrilled. Trembling with rapture the priest hastily rose and was about to prostrate himself and kiss the feet of the beautiful child. He was prevented from doing this, as Jesus took him by the hand just as he was about to kneel, and so instead of kissing his feet, in a half-stooping, half-kneeling, wholly reverential attitude he kissed the Divine Child's hand, uttering passionately as he did so:

"My Lord and my God."

The youth then led the aged man back to his seat, saying with wonderful dignity as he did so: "Blessed are they who know the things you know." Having performed this kindly office to their guests, He once more summed the attitude of modest expectancy on Joseph's will. Joseph, who had risen when Zachary rose, now sat down again. Once before he had seen this calm dignity assert itself in the youth. That was two years ago in the temple of Jerusalem, when Jesus had said: "Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

Joseph, realizing that as head of the family he represented all source of authority, called Jesus forward and said to Him:

"The children of Zabdai of Bethsaida are on yonder plateau. Let us should seem wanting in hospitality, go and bid them welcome to our town."

With a slight inclination of the head towards Joseph, Jesus obeyed without a word the behest of His fosterfather. Zachary watched Him depart, and with the glow of exalted enthusiasm still upon his face, exclaimed:

"O Israel! O Nazareth! If you did but know! If you did but know!"

"Good master," replied Joseph, "His time is not yet come, and he added prophetically, 'nor shall you or I behold the mighty works He yet shall do. Our years shall close before His work begins.'"

Amarias, a tall boy in the little group. "Even in our games you object to our being free. Oh! that the Great Deliverer would come in truth! The holy prophets, so my father says, proclaim this to be the time when the Great Conqueror shall come to deliver Israel from the Roman yoke."

Abner agreed with his brother Subael, and it seemed for once the game would have an unusual ending, but Micha persisted.

"A king! a king!" he shouted again. Just at that moment Jesus appeared at the outer edge of the plateau. Micha caught sight of Him and said:

"See, here comes the son of Mary and Joseph. He is our king."

The group of handsome Jewish youths turned to look at Jesus as He approached. There was a calm dignity surrounding Him which silenced the noisest among them for a moment. Somewhat slowly He walked up to the little gathering and, looking at John and James, He said:

"I bid you welcome to Nazareth." James bowed low, as he would have done to some prince or the high priest whom he had once seen in Jerusalem, when his father had taken him to the paschal feast in the holy city.

It was different with John. He stood transfixed and motionless. His eyes were riveted on that serene face, and it seemed as if he could never sufficiently drink in the sight. His color came and went. He scarcely breathed. A new life seemed to course through his veins. With unspasmodic, stiff behavior he stepped forward and, with an almost unconscious movement, laid his head lightly on the shoulder of Jesus and said in a low tone, unheard by the others: "Thou art indeed our king, and oh! I love Thee so!" John was almost fainting under the sudden excitement. His heart beat rapidly; his temples throbed and the whole love of his soul seemed to flow out towards this marvelous youth, whom he now saw for the first time. Two pure souls had met, and that subtle fellowship of the pure had at once asserted itself, and so strongly would John willingly have died for his newly-found love. His head rested but for a moment on the shoulder of Jesus, but long enough for Him to say:

"Thou shalt yet know Me better and love Me more."

The boys of Nazareth were accustomed to this strange influence which Mary's son frequently exercised over them, and, not being so deeply affected, recovered from it sooner than did the visitors. Micha was still intent upon a fitting termination to their game, and once more demanded that a king be chosen. This time the boys politely referred the question to the strangers from Bethsaida.

John was still under the fascination of the searching eyes of his newly-found friend, and advanced a step from the side of Jesus and, pointing to Him, said vehemently:

"Crown Him! crown Him! for He is worthy in every deed to be the king of the Jews—aye, of the world."

A faint color tinged the face of the beautiful youth, showing the pleasure of the searching eye that had given Him. John's decision met with general approval, and immediately there was increased animation in the little band. Some brought clusters of roses from the rose trees that had been transplanted from the famous Valley of Sharon, others gathered sprays of myrtle and busy fingers began to make the flower crown. Others brought forward a high seat to be used as a throne by the new king. With laughter and shouts they compelled Jesus to sit on the throne, while all in boyish mirth bowed the knee before Him. Then came the great ceremony which closed the evening's sport—the coronation.

It was the custom in those simpler times for the mothers and fathers to take an interest in their children's games and pleasures. On summer evenings at Nazareth this was usually done by the older people coming out to their houses to the plateau, and being present at the coronation and witnessing the homage the younger people paid to their chosen king of the day, and this evening Joseph and Mary had invited the aged Zachary and Elizabeth to the plateau, and Geddiel Sod and Miriam had also brought with them their guests, Zabdai and Salome.

At the moment of the coronation, when the merry boys were heartily shouting, "Hail, king of the Jews! Long live our nation's king! and bowing the knee in homage to the one of their choice, a small band of Roman soldiery came in sight on the edge of the level ground. They had come from Tiberias, on the Lake of Genesareth, and were passing through Nazareth on their way to Niam, which lies at the foot of Mount Tabor.

Decius, the captain of the band, seeing a gathering of people and being aware of the frequency of Jewish insurrections against the Roman yoke, halted his command close to the gathering. As he did so he heard the children shouting their "aves" to their youthful king. The military company appeared to have swooped down suddenly on the innocent and harmless gathering like ugly birds of prey, and the captain flung angrily as he heard the words of the children.

He hastily descended from his horse. The villagers clustered in a group, with the now frightened children on one side of the throne, while opposite them were the Roman soldiers. Mary trembled. She dreaded that insults and indignities would be heaped upon her son by the half-drunken and ribald soldiery. Nor in this was she mistaken.

"A king! what king? 'Tis thus you teach your children treason and sedition even in their games," said the officer, angrily.

"Nay, sir," responded one of the townsmen, "be not angry. It is mere children's sport. We have no thought of insurrection here in Nazareth."

"The well or, soon you would taste of Roman steel." The flower-crowned king had not moved from his chair. The soldier realized the inoffensiveness of the pastime, yet, having come down from his horse with an air of so much importance, he was loath to mount again without letting his subordinates witness some act of authority on his part. He cast a searching glance over the company of boys and their frightened faces seemed to satisfy him. Looking at Jesus, however, he perceived in Him no signs of dismay. He was still seated, and the chaplet adorned His beautiful brow. This angered the rough soldier.

"You, who would be king, come here and bring me your crown." Jesus neither moved nor spoke.

"Look you, you Jewish dog; heed you not what I command?" The calm and placid youth remained seated, but now there were ominous looks of anger on the faces of the children surrounding him.

"Do as I command you at once," shouted the Roman.

"Nay, I do no harm. The play is innocent and harmless," answered Jesus, calmly.

The officer became more furious, while the youths were getting demonstratively angry. Some furtively picked up stones, and by their angry gestures and sullen faces it could be seen in the gathering darkness that the boys were determined to defend their chosen king, and the Roman officer might have departed not without some ugly bruises had not Jesus calmed the rising tumult by one word:

"Peace!" At that single word the boys ceased their hostile demonstrations, and the evidences of the anger and hatred of the Roman soldiery died out of their faces. The officer watched this transformation with wonder, and was at a loss to understand the influence this boy king exercised over his companions. Decius had heard that witches had dwelt from early times at Eador, a little to the south of Nazareth, and he half believed in his ignorance that this was some of their magic art.

Amazed as he was, his anger had not subsided. Striding rapidly towards the throne, the rough soldier seized the crown of roses and tore it violently from the boy king's head. Throwing the flowers on the ground, he trampled them under foot and then, springing to his horse, gave a hurried order for instant departure, and the company of soldiers almost instantly disappeared in the gathering gloom.

The rich brown hair of the beautiful youth was disturbed by the action of the rough soldier and fell forward over his face, that was now pale as the indignity he had suffered.

Mary rushed forward and clasped Him in her arms, saying in an agony of grief:

"My child! my son! my son!"

His head rested a moment on her shoulder, as a dove nestles in its nest, and as it did Mary saw across the clear, pure brow a blood-red mark which the thorns of the rose crown had made. — From the Pilgrim of Our Lady of Martyrs.

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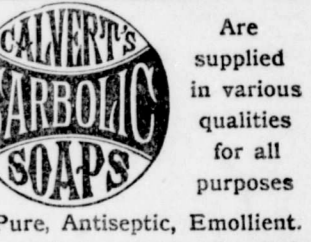
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