

# BOYS AND GIRLS



## IN LITTLE BETHLEHEM.

(Mary W. Brownson, in the 'Presbyterian Banner'.)

'Asabel,' said little Bani, wonderingly, 'why is it that so many people come to Bethlehem upon these days? The streets are never clear of caravans, strangers stand at every turning and the houses are full of guests. To-day thy mother, as she directed her maids, spake of seven kinsmen who will come to her household.'

'O Bani,' cried his boyish companion throwing himself down upon the grassy slopes near the well. 'A numbering of the people hath been ordered,' his friend replied, with conscious superiority, 'and every man goeth to his own city to have his name inscribed upon the rolls. I did hear Sadoc, the ruler of our synagogue, declare this but yesterday.'

'Who hath ordered it?' persisted Bani, with eager curiosity.

'Oh, as to that I cannot tell thee,' Asabel continued carelessly. 'Methinks it was the king, although Sadoc said that there were those who thought it wrong and contrary to the laws of Moses.'

'And must we do wrong at the bidding of the king?' queried Bani, open-eyed.

'It may not be wrong; I do not know,' returned Asabel. 'But we must obey the king until Messiah cometh. Then we shall be free and rich and powerful as were our people in the days of David.'

Bani's eyes shone with excitement. 'Oh, I know that Messiah cometh,' he cried. 'I do hear my father talk much of him. Would that he might come to-day! Thinkest thou, Asabel, that he might be amid the throng?'

'Bani, Bani! thou art but a child and understandest not thine own words,' said his companion, reprovingly. 'No one doth know when the Messiah shall come; no one doth dare to say how he shall appear unto us. He is to be a Son of David and from Bethlehem;

but my father saith that some believe he shall suddenly appear at Jerusalem, and none shall know of him beforehand. Perchance he will ride into the city with the train of a king, while the singers chant his praises and the people shout for joy.'

Little Bani lay back upon the slope beside his friend and looked up at the sky. 'Oh, that I might be at the gate when he entereth in!' he said. 'Would he regard a child like me, or would he be too great a king to notice one so small?'

'He would regard neither me nor thee,' answered Asabel, with decision. 'He would have eyes only for the priests and rulers. Is he not to be our Prince? But, behold, Bani! Yonder come two strangers who turn their beasts toward the well. Be silent and we shall hear what they say to each other.'

The travellers rode up to the well and dismounted to partake of the water. They looked about them in silence for a moment; then the elder man spoke, pointing across the valley to the terraced hill upon which the little town was built. 'Is it not truly called the "House of Bread?" The vineyards on the hill-sides and the cornfields below insure a bountiful provision for the dwellers therein; and the pastures which lie beyond the city afford rich supply for the flocks.'

'Yea, it hath been the home of plenty since the time of David,' said his companion. 'How dear it was to his heart!'

The elder traveller stooped to drink once more of the well of David ere he made reply. 'Verily,' he said, 'I do remember; and like him I have said: "Oh, that one would give me water of the well of Bethlehem!"'

'Mine eyes had never rested upon the royal city before this day,' continued Melchi, 'yet do I also love the inheritance of my fathers, even

as thou dost who hast dwelt here in days past.' 'Is it in the field on this eastern side that the Temple flocks are kept?'

'Yea,' answered Jonan; 'seest thou not the Tower of the Flock standing yonder?'

Melchi turned to gaze in the direction pointed out to him, and stood so for a moment without speaking. Then he quoted in a tone of deep feeling,—"And thou, O Tower of the Flock, the hill of the daughter of Zion, unto thee it shall come, yea the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem!" Jonan, doth not the prophet mean that to Bethlehem shall come the announcement of the Messiah?'

'Verily it doth seem so,' commented his friend, reverently. 'Consider thou also this: "Out of thee shall come forth unto me, that is to be ruler in Israel. Shall not the prince of David's line come to his own city?'

'Jonan,' cried Melchi, suddenly, 'is it not a marvel that the line of David is now gathered into Bethlehem as it hath never been heretofore? From all Judea and beyond Jordan and from far-off Galilee do the members of the royal house assemble that they may enroll themselves. What if the coming of the Deliverer were at hand?'

'The thought has come also to me, Melchi,' replied Jonan, a look of glowing expectation passing over his face. Then as it faded he added soberly, 'Yet do I see no sign of his coming. And, truly, how could he come to a people so unprepared to receive him?'

'Nay, it is not the nation which hath turned aside from the way of Jehovah, but the rulers who have led the people astray,' broke in Melchi, impulsively. But here the sudden uplifting of his companion's hand checked his frank expression of opinion; and following the direction of Jonan's pointing finger his