



THE NURSERY BOOK OF BIBLE STORIES

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" He placed at the east of the garden of Eden, Cherubims. "

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CHAPTER I

THE BEAUTIFUL WORLD

When night comes down and everything is dark and black, we sometimes are a little afraid, for we cannot see all the pleasant things around us, and it makes us feel lonely to be in the dark. The very first thing of all we want is light.

So it was when God made the world that the very first thing He did was to make the light. It had all been quite dark until He looked down and said, "Let there be light," and then the beautiful light came.

There were many things to be done after that. There was the light to be divided into day and night, and the sky and the land and the sea to be made and set all in their right places; and as God worked He was glad, because He saw that it was all going to be very beautiful and very good. But still the earth was quite bare, worse even than the garden in winter when all the flowers are dead, because there had never been any trees or flowers or grass at all. So then God made a glad springtime to come bursting over the earth, and flowers and trees began to grow, and green leaves and buds and corn began to sprout; and instead of a bare, dark world there was a great garden, all clothed in a beautiful green dress and starred with flowers.

Now there is one thing which a garden needs above everything else, and that is sunshine. So God made the sun to shine down from the blue sky in the day-time, and he made the silver moon that hangs up there like a great lamp in the night-time, and all the stars that shine "like diamonds in the sky." Spring, summer, autumn, and winter—God arranged them all, so that everything should grow in its right time.

It was a very silent earth still, for trees and flowers grow very quietly; but soon the sweet sound of music came stealing into the world, for, after making all the fishes that swim in the seas and rivers and streams, God made the dear

birds that chirp and twitter as they fly about. He taught them, too, to make their nests, and bring up the baby birds, so that we should always have birds in the world to sing their songs to us.

Now in the air there was the sound of fluttering wings, and in the water the fishes swam and flashed their tails, and only the earth was waiting for the animals and insects that were to make it their home. So God next made all the beasts and cattle and all the creeping things, and when He looked down He saw it was all very good.

Then it was that God made the greatest thing of all, for it was something that was made "in His own image," which means like God Himself. He made the first man Adam, and the first woman Eve, and He made them different to all the other things which He had created, because He put into them some of His own life, the part of us which we call our soul.

At first the two people whom God had made were very happy indeed. They lived in the most beautiful garden, where all the most wonderful trees and flowers grew, where there was nothing to harm them and everything to make them happy. All the animals and birds were their friends, and Adam gave all of them their names; and there was no suffering or pain in the garden, because everything was good.

Then a sad day came, when Eve was disobedient and all the happiness was spoilt. God had said that Adam and Eve might enjoy all the delicious fruit that grew in the garden except the fruit of one special tree which they were forbidden to touch. But the tempter came, and whispered to Eve that it was very hard that she should not taste that fruit, and that God would not really punish her if she did. Poor Eve was not wise enough to listen to the voice inside her, which told her she must not disobey God; and so she did as the tempter suggested, and all the happiness in that beautiful garden came to an end.

Neither Adam nor Eve had ever known before what fear meant; but now that they had disobeyed God, they were afraid to meet Him, and went and hid themselves. And God was very sorrowful to think His children had disobeyed Him, and by their wrongdoing had brought sin and death into the beautiful world which He had made so good.

No longer could Adam and Eve live in the fair garden, for they must be punished; and God sent them out, and placed His angels with flaming swords to guard the way back.

It had been easy work for Adam in the garden to look after all the growing things; but now it was very different. Thorns and thistles, and all kinds of weeds began to spring up and to choke the good plants, and Adam had to toil hard from morning till night; and Eve too soon learned what it meant to be tired and sorrowful.

But even then there was still some happiness left, for God sent Eve a great gift, the gift of a little son. She called his name Cain. And afterwards another baby boy was born, and this second boy she called Abel.

Perhaps she thought she could never be very sorrowful again, now that she had two boys to love and care for; but, sad to say, as the boys grew up, sorrow and sin crept in again. Cain began to be jealous of his younger brother. From angry, jealous thoughts came angry words, until at last followed angry blows, and Cain killed his brother out in the fields, where he thought no one could see him. But he forgot that God sees everything we do, even when we think we are quite alone, and his punishment followed swiftly. God put a mark upon his brow, and sent him to wander alone out into the world, far away from his home and his mother. Then Eve knew, even better than before, all the trouble and pain and suffering which sin had brought into the world.

CHAPTER II

NOAH AND THE RAINBOW OF HOPE

As God looked down upon the beautiful world He had made, it grieved Him to see how it was spoilt by the wickedness of the people who lived upon it. No one tried to be good or to obey God's laws, and as time went on they grew worse and worse, until God was sorry that He had made the world at all.

"I will destroy it," God said, "both man and beast, and the creeping things, and the fowls of the air."

But there was just one man in all the world who loved God, and tried to please Him; and in the end God determined not to destroy everything, but to save this man and his family, and some of the animals and birds and creeping things as well. And so God told the man, whose name was Noah, exactly what to do-how he was to build a great ark of safety, to be ready for the time when God would destroy the world by a great flood.

All the rest of the people in the world went on enjoying themselves and doing just as they liked, never thinking of God at all. Only Noah worked with all his might to obey God's directions. He tried to warn the people of what was coming, but they only laughed at him and his work. What was this curious kind of ship that he was building ? It surely must be meant to float upon the water. But Noah was building it inland, far away from any sea, and no one had ever beheld such a huge vessel before.

"Where is the great sea on which it is going to float?" asked the people; and they only scoffed when he told them that God would send a mighty flood that would cover the earth and drown all the people of the world. There was no sign of a flood, they said, and they did not believe any flood was

coming. What a fool he was to toil all day and wear himself out with work, instead of taking his ease and enjoying his pleasures.



"AND, LO, IN HER MOUTH WAS AN OLIVE LEAF PLUCKED OFF."

But Noah worked on. And as the years passed by, the ark at last was finished, and Noah went in with his wife and family and two of each of the birds and beasts and insects which God had promised to save. Then the sky grew black with clouds, and a terrible rain began to pour down. Blacker and blacker grew the sky, and fiercer and fiercer blew the wind, and the rain came down in such torrents that the rivers

began to swell and overflow their banks, and presently the whole world was just one great sea of tossing grey waters.

But God remembered His promise, and the ark floated safely on that tossing sea. For many long days the storm raged, and then at last the rain stopped, and the flood began to subside. Noah waited patiently still for a while, and then opened one of the windows of the ark, and sent out a raven and a dove to see if they would find anything to rest upon. But the dove came back with tired wings, and Noah knew that there was no dry ground yet showing above the water. So he waited for another seven days, and again sent the dove out; and this time she came back with a tiny green olive leaf in her beak. And the third time he sent her out she did not return at all.

The waters were slowly going down; the earth, all fresh and clean, began to show itself once more, and the green things were all beginning to grow again. Then God bade Noah open the ark and set all the animals free upon the green earth once more.

So Noah came out with his wife and all his family, and he built an altar to God, and sacrificed upon it the best of everything in a great thanksgiving service.

Then God blessed Noah, and promised that never again would He send another flood to destroy the world. And as Noah listened to God's voice, he looked up, and saw in the sky a beautiful half-circle of shining light made up of all the fairest colours, its ends touching the earth, and its circle stretching across the sky.

It was the sign of God's promise, the rainbow of hope, which should always bring to us its message telling of sunshine after rain, joy after sorrow.

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM.

In those long ago days, when the story of the world was only beginning, a city had grown up, far away in the East, on the banks of the great river Euphrates. The people who settled there had learned to make bricks and build houses; but many of them still lived in tents, for they often wandered far away from their city, and lived among the fields, where they were herding their sheep and cattle.

There were no books in those days to teach the people what they wanted to know; but they learned from other things besides books, and the great sky above them was a page they often studied. They watched the golden sun rise in the east, and marked the hours as it climbed high into the sky, and it taught them all about times and seasons; and at night, when they saw the moon hang out her silver lamp, and the stars come out one by one, they learned the lesson of numbers, and how to guide their way, and many other things.

It was amongst these people that Abraham had been born—Abraham the great traveller, the man who had journeyed far away into unknown lands, and who had met with so many adventures. He had returned now from his wanderings, and returned a very rich man indeed. His possessions were piled high on the backs of the long string of camels and asses; his flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle were driven along by hundreds of his servants; and he, the great chief, in his scarlet robe rode at their head.

A whole country was needed for this large tribe of people, with their flocks and herds; so Abraham halted on the wide plain of Mamre, and settled down there to make his home.

It seemed as if the chief had all that his heart could desire: there was his dear wife, Sarah, to keep him company; there was his gold and silver, his sheep and cattle, a beautiful land to dwell in, and, best of all, he had God for his friend.

But there was just one thing that Abraham and his wife had not got, and they wanted that one thing more than anything else in the world. They had no children, and they longed with all their hearts for a little son. God had been so good to them, had taken care of them through all their wanderings, had given them great riches; but this one gift He had not sent, and they said to themselves, "What is the use of all our possessions when we have no son to enjoy them after we are gone?"

Now it happened one day that Abraham sat at the door of his tent, and looked out over the rich fields where his flocks were feeding, finding very little pleasure in it all, and feeling, perhaps, rather sorrowful and lonely, when suddenly there came to him three wonderful men whom he knew were messengers from God. And the message they brought was a very joyful one—so joyful that Sarah, who was listening inside the tent, could scarcely believe it could be true. God was going to give them a little son, the messenger angels said.

But although Sarah thought the news was too good to be true, Abraham was quite sure that God would do as He promised; and he was quite right, for, after waiting all those many, many years, the baby whom they had so longed for was born.

There was surely no happier woman in all the world than Sarah when she held her little son in her arms, and Abraham's happiness was as great as hers. They called the baby Isaac, which means "laughter," and he was the very joy of their hearts; and as he grew into a strong, healthy boy, they seemed to love him more every day. He was their only child, and so much more precious than all the other gifts that God had given them.

Now God knew that Abraham loved and trusted Him, and He knew, too, how much Abraham loved his little son, and so He made a plan to try which love was the greater.

In the stillness one day God's voice called, "Abraham!"

And Abraham answered at once, "Behold, here am I."

Then, quite plain and clear, the command came, "Take now thy son, thy only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and offer him for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."

Abraham knew just what that meant, for he had often built an altar of stones and offered a lamb upon it to God; but now, instead of a lamb, he was to give his only son.

Not for one moment did Abraham hesitate. He could not understand why God should want to take back His precious gift, but he trusted God with all his heart, and was sure that whatever He did must be right.

Very early in the morning he prepared for the journey to those distant mountains which he could just see on the horizon. He saddled the ass, and told Isaac to get ready to go on a journey with him, and he also carefully cut the wood ready for the burnt offering.

Isaac was quite a big boy by this time, and was accustomed to go on journeys with his father; so he asked no questions about what they were going to do until at last they reached the mountain and began to climb up over the rocks. His father had given him the bundle of wood to carry, and he saw, too, the knife and the fire, so he was sure they were going to offer a sacrifice to God. But where was the lamb? What was the use of fire and wood without the lamb? Isaac was puzzled, and at last he felt that he must ask a question.

"My father," he said.

And the poor father, climbing up and up with tired feet and a heart heavy with sorrow, paused for a moment, and answered, "Here am I, my son."



"THEY WENT BOTH OF THEM TOGETHER."

"Behold the fire and the wood," said Isaac, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

"My son," answered Abraham, "God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering."

So on and on they went, until at last they came to the place which God had chosen; and there Abraham built an altar,

and put everything ready, and took his son, whom he loved so dearly, and who was so willing to do as his father bade him, and put him also upon the altar. Now he took the knife, and raised it up to kill the boy; but before he had time to strike, God's voice rang out from heaven.

"Abraham, Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him, for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me."

So Isaac was saved, and all Abraham's sorrow was turned into joy. He had trusted in God through the darkness of sorrow, when every step of that long journey had cost him bitter suffering; and now in the sun shine of joy he retraced his steps, with a heart so full of gratitude and happiness that the long journey seemed to him as a pathway of flowers, the boy's hand clasped in his, and God leading them.

CHAPTER IV

ISAAC AND REBEKAH

There was sadness in the home of Abraham, the great chief, and his son Isaac. Sarah's tent was empty now, and Isaac, her son, went about sorrowfully, for he sorely missed his mother, whom he had loved with all his heart. Abraham was an old man now, and his life was nearly over; but Isaac was young, and the future looked very lonely and very sad to him.

Abraham watched his son with anxious eyes. It was not good for him to grieve so sorely. Surely it was time that he should marry and have a wife to bring back happiness to him. But it must be the right kind of wife; his son must not choose any of the ordinary women amongst whom they lived. No, he would send his old and trusted servant back to that far-away home he had left so long ago, and bid him bring from there a maiden of his own people, one who would be a fit wife for his only son. So here the story begins.

It was evening, and the little village, perched on the side of the hill, shone white in the last rays of the setting sun against its rocky background. Below, in the plain, evening shadows had already begun to gather as a weary traveller made his way with his swaying train of camels towards the well, sheltered by palm trees at the foot of the hill.

He was an old man, and his dusty sandals and travel-stained appearance showed that he had come a long distance. The camels, too, were travel-worn and thirsty. There was no one at the well as the old man, Abraham's trusted servant, drew near; and after he had made the camels kneel down he sat himself at the well side to wait until the women of the village should come to draw the evening supply of water.

It was a difficult errand on which his master had sent him. How was he to find out which of all the village maidens was the right wife for Isaac, his beloved master's son ? Surely the best thing he could do was to ask God to help him. So there, in the gathering twilight, the old servant knelt and asked God to be graciously kind to him, and to show him by a sign which maiden he should choose. He would ask for a drink, and the one who answered, "Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also," would be the one he sought.

He had not long to wait, for scarcely was his prayer ended when down the path that led from the village came a young girl carrying a pitcher upon her shoulder. The old man watched her keenly. "She is very fair to look upon," he said to himself. He wondered if she would also have a kind heart. Then after she had filled her pitcher he determined to try the test, and went forward to meet her.

"Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher," he said. Immediately the girl lowered her water-jug from her shoulder and held it towards him.

"Drink, my lord," she said kindly; and as she looked round on the tired beasts kneeling patiently there, she added, "I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking."

It seemed almost too good to be true. The old man could only stand and look at her in silent wonder as she gave the camels their drink. Then he took from his pack two golden bracelets and a wonderful gold ear-ring, and presented them to her, asking her name, and if she thought he could find a lodging in the village.

If he had had any doubts about the sign these vanished now as he listened to her answer. She was Rebekah, the daughter of his master's own brother, not only one of his race, but one of his own family.

So he followed her as she went on ahead to tell her father of the traveller who was coming, and when he arrived

there was a warm welcome awaiting him, and everything in readiness for his comfort.

But before the faithful servant would even eat or drink he declared that he must tell them the reason of his coming: how his master Abraham had sent him to seek for a wife for his only son, and how God had showed him by a sign that Rebekah was the maiden of his choice.

The family listened wonderingly. Surely it was plain that they must let their beautiful Rebekah return with the servant to be Isaac's bride, for God had clearly shown that it was His will.

That night there was much feasting and rejoicing, but next morning a little sadness crept in. It was not easy to part with the only daughter of the house. Would it not be possible to wait for a few days? asked her mother wistfully.

"No," said the old servant decidedly, "send me away, that I may return at once."

"We will call Rebekah," said her mother, "and she shall decide." Rebekah came and answered the question bravely. Yes, she would go. She was ready to start at once on that long journey, ready to trust herself to the faithful servant whom God had sent to fetch her.

She was very young; all unknown and untried the future lay before her. It might be a shining path of happiness, or rough with the stones of difficulty, but it was the path God had chosen for her.

So after many farewells they set out, a long train of swaying camels, to journey to that far-off land where Abraham and his son Isaac dwelt. It was again evening time as the journey drew to an end. Isaac had wandered out into the fields after his day's work, to be alone with his sorrowful thoughts. He was watching the sun dip down in the west, when far along the winding strip of white road a cloud of dust caught his eye. Travellers must be coming that way. Closer and closer they

came, until the camels and their riders could be clearly seen through the dust. Then Isaac saw that it was the faithful servant who had returned; and as they stopped and dismounted, he knew that the silent girl who stood there with veiled face was the wife his father had desired for him.

Quickly the servant told his story, and then Isaac came near and took Rebekah's hand and led her away. There was but one place for this beautiful maiden who had so trustfully left her home to come to him. Straight to his mother's tent he took her, that silent tent which now would be empty no longer; and ere long all his loneliness and sorrow vanished, and his empty heart too was filled with love for his beautiful wife who had come to comfort him for the loss of his mother.

CHAPTER V

THE TWO BROTHERS, JACOB AND ESAU

It had indeed been a shining road of happiness which Rebekah had trod since she had left her far distant home to become the wife of Isaac, and perhaps the greatest happiness of all had come when her twin babies were born, and they told her that God had sent her two little sons.

Now, although the babies were twins they were not in the least alike, and the older they grew the more different they became. Esau, the elder, was a big strong boy, fond of working in the open air, a keen hunter, loving all kinds of out-of-door sports. He was rough-looking, too, beside his smooth-faced, gentle brother Jacob, who was a thoughtful, quiet boy, quite content to do indoor work, and caring very little for rough games or the excitement of hunting.

It was Jacob who was his mother's favourite. She had always loved him best. It displeased her to think that Esau with his rough ways and rough looks was to be lord of all, was to have his father's blessing as well as the birthright, and that Jacob, her quiet, beautiful boy, should have nothing. There was always an echo in her heart of God's words, "the elder shall serve the younger."

But if his mother loved Jacob best, it was on Esau that all his father's hopes and love were fixed. Isaac delighted in the wild adventures and strength of his hunter son. He loved the strong hairy hands which were so skilful in the use of weapons, and the rough looks of his son only filled him with pride. When Esau entered he brought with him the wild fragrance of the woods and hills which clung even to his clothes, and it rejoiced his father's heart.

In many ways it was Jacob who was the cleverer of the two boys; but it was this very cleverness which sometimes led

him into crooked ways and taught him to take a mean advantage of his brother. So one day, when Esau had been out hunting and came home hungry and faint, Jacob offered him food, a dish of red pottage cooked and ready, if for it he would give up his birthright. Esau was too hungry and too careless to think what that meant. He did not indeed deserve the birthright if he was willing to give it away so easily. But he only thought how hungry he was, and that he might die if he did not have food, and so Jacob's crooked plan was successful.

Now, although Jacob had managed to get the birthright, there was something else he wanted, something which his mother, too, thought of day and night. Whichever of the two sons received their father's blessing it was who would be master of all, who would inherit all the good things, and carry on the family name. It was of this blessing that Jacob and his mother thought continually, and at last the time came when it must be decided once for all.

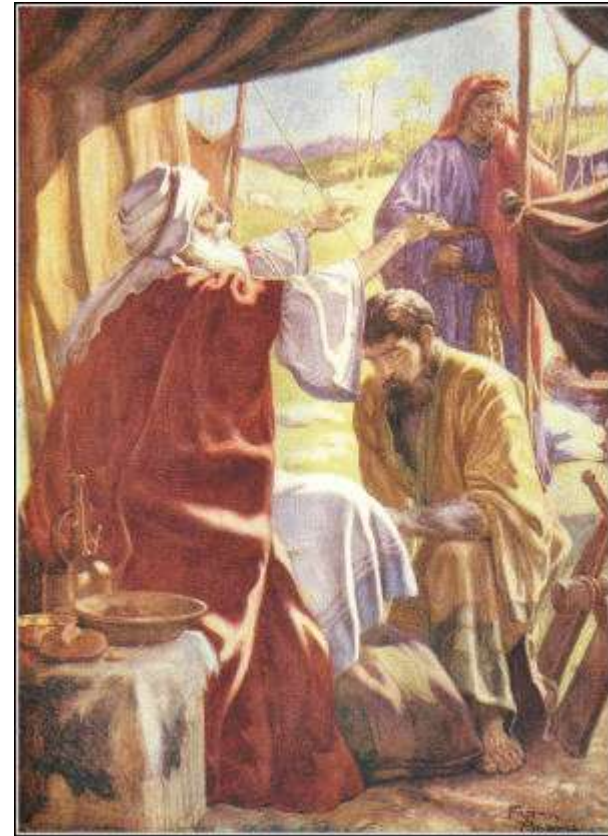
Isaac had grown very old and knew he had not much longer to live, and he called Esau, his beloved elder son, and told him to go out hunting and to prepare some venison for him, the special dish which he loved.

"Make me savoury meat, such as I love," he said, "that my soul may bless thee before I die."

Rebekah, listening at the tent door, knew what that meant. She watched Esau set out to do his father's bidding, and then she called quickly to Jacob. There was not a moment to be lost. He must go at once to the flock that was feeding in the field close by, and bring her two kids. She would make of them the savoury meat, and he would then take the dish to his father and pretend that he was Esau. The poor old father was almost blind now; he would not be able to tell the difference.

But Jacob hesitated. He did not think it was a safe plan. Suppose that his father should touch him and feel his smooth skin. Why, he would know at once that it was not Esau.

"Go and do as I tell thee," said his mother. He might leave it all to her; she had planned everything. And after cooking the food, she took the hairy skins of the kids and put them on Jacob's hands and on his neck; and she dressed him, too, in some of his brother's clothes. Then she sent him in quickly to his father, with the smoking dish of savoury meat in his hands.



"SO HE BLESSED HIM."

The blind old father could not see who it was, he could only stretch out groping hands to feel if this was really his son Esau. Somehow he had an uneasy idea that the voice did not sound like Esau's voice.

"Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son," he said, "whether thou be my very son Esau or not."

Those groping hands felt carefully over Jacob's hairy neck and hands. Yes, it must be Esau, but he would make quite sure.

"Art thou my very son Esau?" he asked.

And Jacob answered, "I am."

The food was eaten, and again Isaac called his son to come near to him, and as Jacob bent down to kiss him the old man smelt the sweet earthy fragrance of Esau's borrowed clothes. That smell was a delight to him, and he blessed his son with a wonderful blessing.

"See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed," he began, "therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth."

Jacob was to be lord of all. The blessing was his now, and no one could take it away. He had only been just in time; the blessing was scarcely ended, and he had only just left the tent, when Esau came hurrying in.

Then the trick was discovered.

"Thy brother hath come with subtilty and taken away thy blessing," said Isaac, trembling with grief. And when he heard that, there burst from Esau an exceeding bitter cry.

Surely that cry must have hurt his mother's heart, surely Jacob must have hated his own mean ways when he heard that terrible cry of grief.

Already his crooked ways were bringing their punishment. He dared not stay any longer in his home, but must flee away into a distant land, to his mother's people, where he would be safe from Esau's anger.

Alone in the desert, with only a stone for his pillow, he dreamed that God's angels came down the golden stairs of heaven to bring him a message of comfort; but there was little

comfort for one who was banished from home, and who knew that he deserved his punishment. He repented sorely now, and God forgave him and allowed him to enjoy the blessing; but all his life he suffered for his deceit, and paid in sorrow for the evil he had done.



JACOB'S DREAM

CHAPTER VI

JOSEPH, THE DREAMER

There were many reasons why Jacob should love his son Joseph more than all his other sons, but there was one special reason above all. The little lad's mother had been more to him than any one else in all the wide world, and when she died, leaving Joseph and a new-born baby brother, Benjamin, all the love in the father's heart turned to his two little sons. The elder brothers were strong, grown-up men, quite able to look after themselves; it was on Joseph that all his father's tenderness, all his hopes, were fixed.

At first the other brothers took no notice of their father's preference; but as Joseph grew older they began to feel uneasy and envious, especially when Jacob made a beautiful coat for the boy, a coat of many pieces of cloth all of different colours joined together. So gay and beautiful a coat it was, that every one who saw him wearing it said, "This must be the son of a great chief."

But if the gay coat made them angry, they were more angry still; when Joseph began to dream strange dreams and to tell them to his brothers. He must be full of wicked pride, they said, or how could he dream such dreams. There, in a cornfield, so Joseph said, his sheaf had stood upright, while all their sheaves had bowed down before it; and another time in his dream he had seen the sun and moon and eleven stars all doing reverence to him.

Was he indeed going to rule over all of them? It was more than his brothers could bear, and they began to hate him with all their hearts. It was hard for Joseph, because he had not meant to boast when he told them of his dreams. If he was proud of his coat of many colours, it was only because it was a gift from his father. He was a straight-forward, good-natured

boy, clever and brave, and ready to take his turn in watching the flocks or helping his brothers with their work in the field.

But it grew day by day more difficult to keep the peace between them, and the only quiet times were when the elder brothers went farther afield to find new pasture for their flocks.

It was at one of these times when the brothers had been gone for some time that Jacob called Joseph to him and bade him go and find his brothers, and bring back news if they were safe and well.

Joseph was now a lad of about seventeen, and this would be the first journey he had taken by himself; so he was eager to show that he was to be trusted, and set out most cheerfully.

After some days he arrived at Shechem, where his father had told him he would find his brothers, but there were no signs of them there. Unwilling to return home without news, Joseph wandered about until he met a man, who directed him to a place farther on; and at last he caught sight of their tents in a field far ahead, and he hurried forward with a light heart to greet them.

It was a clear day and the shepherds' keen eyes could see far along the winding road that stretched out towards Shechem. So, long before Joseph arrived they saw his figure in the distance hastening towards them.

Perhaps it was the gay colour of his coat that first told them who it was, and perhaps it was the coat that reminded them of their hate and their envious feelings, and brought to their memory again those prideful dreams.

"Behold, this dreamer cometh," they said to one another. "Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

With dark looks of hate they watched the gay figure coming so joyfully to meet them, and only one heart felt any pity for the boy. Reuben, the eldest brother, made up his mind quickly that he would save him if possible. Only he must set to work cunningly, for those other brothers were very determined men. What was the use of killing him outright? he suggested; why not put him into the pit close by and leave him there to die? (for he meant to come back and save Joseph after the others had gone).

Never dreaming of evil Joseph came on, and now he ran to them and began to give them his father's message. But the rough hands held out to him were not held out in welcome. The brothers seized the boy and savagely tore off his coat, as if the very sight of it hurt their eyes, and then they hurried him towards the pit which Reuben had pointed out.

Then Joseph knew that they meant to kill him. He knew that if they threw him into one of those deep narrow pits there was no chance of climbing up its steep sides, even if he were not immediately drowned in the water which often gathered there. Was he never to see his father and little brother again? nevermore to spend happy days in the green fields under the blue sky? It was useless to cry out or beg for pity, and Reuben was not there to help him. The pit was reached, strong hands pushed him forward, and into the blackness he fell, down, down, until with a terrible thud he reached the bottom. There was no water to break his fall, for the pit was dry.

There!—that was done! The cruel brothers went off to a little distance and began sullenly to eat their midday meal. But scarcely had they begun when they saw a company of travellers coming towards them, a long train of camels laden with spices, on their way down to Egypt.

Here was a splendid opportunity of making some money out of their evil plan. Instead of leaving Joseph to starve in the pit, they would fetch him out and sell him to these

merchants, who would most likely give a good price for such a strong young slave.



"THEY SOLD JOSEPH TO THE ISHMEELITES."

Perhaps for a moment, when Joseph heard their voices at the pit's mouth, and when they drew him up and lifted him out into the sunshine again, he thought they were sorry and meant to be kind to him, but that thought soon vanished.

The Midianite merchants were waiting, and very soon a rope was bound round his hands and he was tied to the saddle of the man who had bought him, and he knew now that they had drawn him up from the pit only to sell him as a slave.

Meanwhile Reuben had been keeping out of sight, waiting to return and rescue Joseph as soon as it was safe to do so. Very cautiously he at last stole back. But alas! when he reached the pit he found that it was empty. What had happened.? In his distress he forgot his caution; he no longer cared to hide his intentions from his brothers.

"The child is not; and I, whither shall I go?" he cried to them in bitter sorrow, when at last he found them.

With angry, sullen looks they told him that Joseph was now far away on his road to Egypt. He must keep their secret. There was but one thing to be done. Joseph's coat lay there, just as they had torn it off him: they would dip the coat in goat's blood and carry it to their father.

The poor, gay-coloured little coat, all bloodstained and torn, was brought and laid out before Jacob's eyes.

"This have we found," said the brothers: "know now whether it be thy son's coat or no."

Did he not indeed know that coat of many colours? Had not his heart been filled, many a time, with pride and love as he watched his boy wearing it with the gallant air of a young chieftain.

"It is my son's coat," he cried, with a bitter cry of grief; "an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces."

CHAPTER VII

JOSEPH, THE RULER

It was a dreadful thing to be sold for a slave, and Joseph might well have become sullen and hopeless in the strange land of Egypt to which the merchantmen took him. But instead of being sorry for himself and thinking only of the unkindness and wickedness of his brothers, he made the best of everything, and set himself to do his new work as well as possible. If he was a slave he would be a thoroughly good slave.

So it was that his first master, Potiphar, soon found that this fair-haired, good-looking Hebrew boy was one to be trusted; and as time went on, he not only gave him his freedom, but made him the chief servant of his household. Then, just when happy days dawned again for Joseph, the sunshine was once more overshadowed. His master's wife accused him of doing wrong, and declared he was thoroughly bad; and so all his well-deserved favours were taken from him, and he was put in prison.

Even in prison, however, Joseph's quiet goodness and his wise ways made him a favourite with every one. He was the friend of all the prisoners, and ere long became the governor's right hand. Still it was weary work to be shut up in prison, and he longed with all his heart for freedom and a chance to win a place for himself in the great world. He knew that Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, was not unfriendly to strangers. If only he could reach his ear all might be well.

At last the chance came. There were two of Pharaoh's servants in the prison, one the king's cupbearer, and the other his chief baker, and both these men were sorely troubled one night because of the dreams they had dreamt. There surely was a meaning in these dreams, but who could explain them?

Now Joseph had thought a great deal about dreams, and so he listened to these men, and told them what it seemed to him their dreams must mean. The chief baker's dream was a sad one. He had dreamt of three baskets, which he carried on his head, baskets filled with the king's food, but the birds had come and eaten up all the food. The three baskets were three days, said Joseph, and in three days the baker would be hanged and the birds would eat his flesh. But the cup-bearer's dream was a happy one, for he had seen a vine which bore three clusters of grapes, which he had pressed out into the king's cup and presented to Pharaoh. The three clusters of grapes were three days, said Joseph, and in three days' time the cupbearer would be once more free and hand the king his golden cup.

"But think of me when it shall be well with thee," added Joseph to the cupbearer wistfully, "and show kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house: for indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon."

In three days all that Joseph had said came true. The chief baker was hanged, and the chief butler was set free and stood once more before the king. Only, he quite forgot the man who had been so kind to him in prison, and for two years never once thought of Joseph.

But at last something happened which reminded him. Once again it was a dream, but this time the dreamer was Pharaoh, the great king. He had sent for all the cleverest men in the land to explain his dreams to him, but no one could find a meaning for them. Then the cup-bearer suddenly remembered Joseph, and came and told the king all that had happened when he was in prison. Surely it would be worth while to try this man. So Pharaoh sent and brought Joseph out of prison, and asked him if it was true that he could tell the meaning of dreams.

There was no pride or boastfulness in Joseph's answer. Of himself, he said, he could do nothing, but with God's help he would tell the king all that he could.

So Pharaoh told his dreams, and as Joseph listened he knew at once that they had been sent as a warning from God. Seven years of good harvests and plenty of food were coming, and after that seven years of famine when, if all the food of the good years was eaten up, the people would starve. The warning dreams had been sent so that the corn should be saved up and stored; and it would be a good plan, said Joseph, to find the very wisest and best man in all the land who would undertake to do this.

Pharaoh listened thoughtfully, and soon made up his mind. He felt at once that Joseph was a man to be trusted.

"Forasmuch as God hath showed thee all this," he said, "there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou."

It was a great chance for Joseph, one day a poor unknown prisoner and the next the greatest man except the king in all the land of Egypt. But although his outside life was changed, he himself remained just the same. He was as keen as ever on doing his best, as brave and fearless in serving God and the king, as wise in ruling as he had been in serving.

So, when the years of famine came there were great stores of corn laid up to feed the Egyptians; and not only the people of Egypt, but strangers from other lands, came to Joseph the Ruler to buy food.

Then it was that one day ten tired, travel-stained men arrived at the city, saying they had come from the far-distant land of Canaan to buy corn for their wives and families, who were starving. Joseph knew them at once. They were his ten brothers—those brothers whom he had last seen when, as a helpless young boy, he had knelt and begged them for mercy. Now they came kneeling to the great ruler, little dreaming that

this powerful prince was the young brother they had betrayed and sold.



JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

And Joseph did not mean to tell them just yet. He pretended to take them for spies, and spoke roughly to them.

"Thy servants are no spies," the brothers answered humbly. "We are the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is not."

Even then Joseph pretended that he did not believe them. No, they must first prove their words by bringing their youngest brother to him. They might leave one of their number

behind as a hostage, and take corn for their families and return to fetch their brother. For Joseph longed to see Benjamin again, the little brother whom he had so dearly loved.

At first Jacob would not hear of letting the boy go. He remembered Joseph's sad fate, and refused to trust Benjamin to his brothers. But presently, when all the corn was eaten up, and it seemed as if they must all die of hunger, he agreed that there was nothing else to do but to allow Benjamin to go down to Egypt and buy more corn from the great ruler.

Then Joseph could pretend no longer. The sight of Benjamin awoke all the old love in his heart, and he was obliged to turn away his head lest his brothers should see that his eyes were full of tears. Afterwards he sent every one away, and when he was alone with his brothers he told them who he was.

There was no fear of famine for them now. Nothing in all the land was too good for the brothers of the great ruler, and ere long there were wagons and camels on their way to Canaan to fetch Jacob, the old father, and all the wives and little ones belonging to the ten brothers. They would all now share in Joseph's good fortune.

So Jacob's sorrow was turned into joy when the news was brought to him that Joseph was alive, and governor over all the land of Egypt. It sounded almost like a magic tale, and Jacob could not believe it at first; but joy gave him strength to endure the long journey. And there at the end Joseph stood waiting to welcome him-Joseph, the great ruler, held in such honour in that land; Joseph, the man whose word was law, and who was clad in rich robes, and lived in princely state. But in Jacob's eyes he was still just the little lad who, in his gay coat of many colours, had tended the sheep in the home fields and been the light of his father's eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FINDING OF MOSES

Many long years had passed since the days when Joseph's brothers and their families had settled in the land of Egypt. They were a great nation in numbers now, but the Egyptians still ruled over them, and used them as servants. The Pharaoh who had been so kind to the shepherds from Canaan was dead long ago, and the new kings, or Pharaohs, as they were called, hated foreigners, and began to treat the Israelites very harshly. There were too many of them, they said; it was dangerous to have so many strong, powerful slaves. They must be kept down, and made to work from morning till night, and be beaten if they did not work fast enough.

That was very hard for the poor people; but worse was to come. An order was issued one day which spread sorrow through all the land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived. Every baby boy that was born was to be thrown into the river. Girl babies might be allowed to live, for they would be useful as slaves, but boys might grow up to fight for their country, and so they must be destroyed.

In one little house, not far from the great river Nile, a woman sat holding her tiny baby in her arms, while the tears ran down her cheeks. He was such a beautiful baby, so strong and fair and healthy; but the king's order was that he was to be thrown into the river, where the cruel, hungry crocodiles were waiting to snap up everything they could find for a meal. Jochebed, the poor mother, held her baby closer in her arms. No, she could not obey the king's order. She would try and hide the baby for a little while, at any rate.

It was easy to hide a baby while he was still tiny and slept most of the day; but when he grew bigger it was much

more difficult. His sister Miriam did her best to help her mother; but any day, now that the baby was three months old, he might be discovered, and something must be done at once.

So Jochebed thought of a plan, and prayed to God that He would help her to carry it out. At the edge of the river there grew tall bulrushes, which, when cut down and dried, could be made into many useful things. Taking some of these bulrushes, she wove them into a little cradle with a cover to it, just like a little ark, and this she covered with a kind of pitch, so that not a drop of water could come through. Inside the cradle she made a soft bed, and laid the baby there while he was fast asleep, and set the ark afloat in the water where the bulrushes were growing. She knew that presently the great princess, Pharaoh's daughter, would come down to bathe in the river, and would notice the queer little ark floating there.

Very soon the royal procession came winding down from the palace towards the river, as the princess in her gorgeous robes made her way to bathe in the pool of the lotus flowers. But at the edge of the river she stopped. What was that among the bulrushes? It was no lotus flower, but a strange-looking covered basket, and she ordered her maidens to bring it to her.

The little ark was lifted out of the water and carried to the princess. There was surely something alive inside, and the princess was full of curiosity as she leaned down and lifted the cover to look in. Then she started back in amazement. The dearest little baby she had ever seen lay there, all rosy and fresh after his sleep, gazing up at her with wide-open eyes. The maidens crowded round, and the sight of all those strange faces was more than the baby could bear. He puckered up his face and began to cry.

The princess loved babies, and she had none of her own. That little wailing cry went to her heart. She guessed at once that this was one of the Hebrew babies which had been ordered to be destroyed, and she made up her mind that this beautiful boy should at least be saved.



"SHE SAW THE CHILD: AND, BEHOLD, THE BABE WEPT."

All this time Miriam had been watching from her hiding-place close by, and with anxious, beating heart she came forward now. Could she help the princess? she asked. Should she run and find some Hebrew woman who might look after the baby?

Perhaps the princess guessed that the baby's mother would not be far off, and she must have smiled a little when a nurse was so quickly found. But she took no notice of that.

"Take this child away," she said, when Jochebed stood humbly before her, "and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages."

It was merely as a nurse that the mother was hired. The great princess meant to adopt the baby as her own. But he was safe, and Jochebed's heart was full of gratitude to God as she took her little son into her arms again.

As long as he needed a nurse the baby was left to be looked after by his mother in the little house by the river side. The princess called him Moses, which means "drawn out," because he had been drawn out of the water, and she had made up her mind that as soon as he was old enough he should come to live with her at the palace, and be brought up as a prince. He would be treated just as if he was really her son.

But his poor mother had him for those first precious years while he was still a little boy, and she did not waste one minute of that time in her training of him. She taught him about God, and told him all the wonderful stories about his own country, so that he should never forget that he belonged to God's people, even when he should become a prince in the Egyptian palace. Just as a gardener sows seeds in a garden which afterwards grow up into beautiful flowers, so she sowed the seeds of truth in the heart of her little son, which long afterwards were to blossom out and bear such wonderful fruit.

Then when Moses was old enough to do without a nurse, she took him to the palace, and "brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son."

CHAPTER IX

MOSES, THE GREAT LEADER

So Moses grew up in the palace, treated as a prince instead of as a slave. He learned his lessons with the other boys of the palace, and was taught all that the wisest Egyptians could teach him. As he grew to be a man he learned also to be a soldier, and took rank as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. But deep down in his heart he never forgot his own people.

The poor Israelites were worse off now than ever. They were forced to work harder and harder, were beaten and ill-treated in a most cruel way, and there was no one to speak a good word for them. In vain Moses tried to help them. His interference only seemed to bring fresh trouble upon them, and they looked with suspicion on the grandly-dressed, royal-looking young man who came from the king's palace. How could he understand their misery?

Then a day came when Moses found one of the Egyptian taskmasters beating a poor Israelite most unmercifully, and the sight made him so angry that he rushed in to defend the slave, and dealt the cruel task master such a heavy blow that it killed him. The Israelites, instead of being grateful, only mistrusted him the more; and the next time he tried to help them they asked him if he meant to kill them as he had killed the Egyptian.

Moses knew at once then that the story had been whispered throughout the country, and that as soon as it reached Pharaoh's ears his life would not be safe. The only thing to be done was to escape to some distant land; and so, with sorrow and disappointment in his heart, he fled from the palace, leaving behind all the riches and honours he had enjoyed so long.

A very different kind of life began now for Moses. He had journeyed far into the desert, and joined company there with an Arab tribe, which wandered from place to place feeding their flocks, and instead of being a prince he now became a shepherd.

But God had more difficult work for him to do than feeding sheep; and ere long, out on the lonely hillside, the message came. He was to go back, he was to set himself to the task of freeing his people from Pharaoh's power, and to lead them out into the land of Canaan, where they would be no longer slaves but a free people.

At first, when Moses heard God's voice bidding him do all this, he thought it was an impossible task for him to attempt. Pharaoh would never listen to him. His own people would not trust him. He was not a great speaker, and he would most certainly fail. But God bade him do his best, and trust in the help that would be given him. Aaron, his brother, should be the spokesman, and God would work such wonders that both Pharaoh and the Israelites would be forced to listen to him.

Now Moses was a born leader of men, strong and fearless, and a splendid general, and above all he had now a firm faith that God's strong arm would fight for him. So he left his quiet life, and began the great work at God's command.

At first it seemed quite hopeless. Pharaoh refused to let his slaves go, even for a few days' journey into the wilderness. Time after time God sent terrible plagues on Pharaoh and all the land of Egypt. Punishment after punishment fell on them, and still they refused to allow the Israelites to leave the country. Then at last God sent the angel of death, and killed all the eldest sons in every house, so that the whole land was filled with mourning. A great wail went up from the palace and from the poorest dwellings, and Pharaoh was so terrified that he told Moses to lead the people away at once. They might take anything they liked with them, only they must go quickly.

So the great company of people set out with all their families, their wives and children, their flocks and herds, and the gifts which the Egyptians thrust into their hands in their eagerness to get rid of them. It was Moses, the great leader, who arranged everything, and guided them on their way, and brought them to the shores of the Red Sea.

But by that time Pharaoh began to recover from his terror, and to think he had made a mistake in letting the people go so easily. A great army was sent in hot haste after them; and the poor Israelites, looking back, could see the Egyptians coming towards them from behind, while in front stretched the wide waters of the Red Sea. What was to become of them? Of course it was the fault of their leader, they thought. He had only brought them here to be cut to pieces or drowned.

But Moses knew better. He knew that God would make a passage for them through the sea, so he ordered them to go forward. In fear and trembling they did as he bade them, and behold! God sent a strong wind which divided the water so that a passage appeared, and they walked over on dry land.

Behind them the army of Pharaoh swept on. The chariots were driven at full speed, the horsemen came thundering along. They too reached the passage that led across the water, but it was too late; the people had all reached the other side, and the sea had begun to flow back. The chariot wheels sunk in the wet sand, the horses began to flounder, and before long all the great army was swept away by the returning tide.

So the people were saved from the Egyptians. But there were still many other enemies to be faced, and for forty long years they journeyed, a tribe of wanderers, across the desert. Many were the battles they fought, and many were the troubles they suffered. Sometimes they had no food to eat, sometimes they almost died for want of water, and when anything went wrong it was always Moses whom they blamed.

But the great leader was very patient with them. Only once he was so angry with their murmuring that he was tempted to disobey God's direction; and then he sorrowfully knew that, as a punishment, he would not be allowed to lead them on into the Promised Land of Canaan. His work was nearly done, and others, he knew, would be able to finish what he had begun; but it must have been a sore grief to him. He was quite an old man now, but yet he showed no sign of age, and was as strong and full of courage as when he had been first called to do God's work.

And now the word had come that he must lay down his leadership. From the top of Mount Pisgah God would show him the Promised Land, and there he must die.

With strong, firm steps the great leader climbed the rocky mountain side, and from the top of the mount he saw the land of Canaan stretched out before him, that fair land so rich and fruitful, "flowing with milk and honey." The people, watching below, had seen him as he climbed higher and higher until he disappeared from their sight. Did they know, as they caught the last glimpse of his tall, straight figure, that their eyes would never look on him again, that he would never return to lead them and watch over them as he had so faithfully done until now?

Alone upon the mountain top he stood, as solitary and grand as those everlasting hills, ready to obey God's call; and then he "was not, for God took him."

CHAPTER X

THE STORY OF THE SPIES

On the banks of the river Jordan a great army was encamped; the fields were covered with tents, and there was the constant sound of the marching of feet and the clash of weapons. For this was the army of the children of Israel, led by their great general, Joshua. It was waiting there to cross the river and attack the city of Jericho, which could be seen across the plain, clear against the distant line of the horizon.

Moses was dead, but God had given His people a new leader, who was to carry on the great work of conquest and lead the people into the Promised Land. No one knew yet what sort of a leader Joshua would prove to be. The test would come in the battle which awaited them when they would march against the city across the river. They could not know how powerful and how splendidly brave he was; they had not heard the message of his commission from God: "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

It is a great sight to see an army march out with banners flying and drums beating; but there is another part of war which always seems almost mean and contemptible, although it is most necessary. It is the part which is played by spies, men so cunning and quick and clever that they can steal the enemies' secrets, and find out many things that may save the lives of their own soldiers, and help to give them the victory.

Now Joshua knew just how useful a spy could be, and he wanted to know what was happening behind the high walls of Jericho, and what the people there were thinking about. So early one morning two figures went stealing across the plain,

and crept nearer and nearer to the distant city until they came quite close to one of its gates.

It was a wonderful city, with high, thick walls and strong gates, fortified against every kind of enemy; and it was a beautiful city too, for palm trees grew all around it, and the sweet scent of spices came floating over its streets. So it was called Jericho, which means "fragrant," and some of the people called it "the city of palm trees."

As soon as the sun began to sink and the dusk crept on, the two spies slipped through the open gate, hoping that no one would notice them as they mixed with the crowd that always gathered there. They listened carefully to what the people were saying to each other, they noted everything with their quick eyes, and they soon learned all they wanted to know, and especially the fact that the people were desperately afraid of the army encamped on the river bank. It was not its strength and fighting power they feared-these men of Jericho were brave men and great fighters; but there was something strange and mysterious about that army, and they had heard wonderful tales of how that wandering people were guided and protected and helped by the unseen God whom they worshipped.

All this the spies discovered; and then, as daylight began to fade, they looked for a place where they could safely rest for the night. It was but a poor place they found, a little house built into the city wall, and the woman, Rahab, who lived there, was not at all what we would call a good woman. But, as it turned out, it was a place of real safety, and the woman proved a very good friend indeed to those two weary spies who had come to seek for a night's lodging in her house.

For so it was that scarcely had the men gone in and settled themselves to rest, than a loud knocking sounded on the door, and the voice of the king's messenger was heard ordering the woman Rahab to open and deliver up the two men who had come to spy out the city. There had been keen eyes on the look-out at the gate that evening. The men had been noticed

and watched, and a message had been sent to tell the king that there were spies in the house of Rahab. "Bring forth the men which are entered into thy house," the messenger shouted.

But Rahab was quite sure that the mysterious army from the other side of the river would soon come marching on to take Jericho, as it had taken so many other cities; and so she made up her mind quickly to save the spies, and perhaps gain their friendship. Very hastily, then, she made up her plan, and taking the men on to the roof where her store of flax was laid out to dry, she told them to lie down flat, while she spread the flax over them, and hid them completely. After that she went down to open the door, and to answer the king's messenger.

"Spies!" she said; "how could I know that the two men who came here were spies? And besides, they left long ago before the city gates were shut. If you go quickly, you may overtake them."

Never doubting her word, the messenger hurried away; and in a short time a company of men rode out, the city gates clanging shut behind them, while they hurried on their way, hoping to overtake the spies before they should reach the river.

But as soon as the men were gone Rahab brought the spies down from the roof, and told them what she had done, and begged them in return to save her and all her relations when the great army should sweep on, and the city should be taken.

The two men promised at once that this should be done if she still kept their secret. "And it shall be," they said, "when the Lord hath given us the land that we will deal kindly and truly with thee."

Then she took a scarlet rope and lowered the men out of the window, which was built into the city wall, and told them to go up into the mountains and hide there for three days until the king's messengers should grow tired of looking for them.



"ARISE, GO OVER THIS JORDAN, THOU, AND ALL THIS PEOPLE."

There, in the dark shadow of the city wall, the men must have stood looking up at the face of the woman who leaned out of the window, above the scarlet thread that dangled down from her hand. And before they left they whispered up that they would surely remember their promise, but that she must bring all her kindred safely into those rooms and mark the house with the scarlet cord, and then, as a reward for her great kindness, not one of them should come to harm.

Three days later the spies managed to get back to the camp, and told the great leader what they had seen and

learned, and of the promise they had made. It was exactly what Joshua had wanted to know, and so ere long the great army began its onward march.

Just as He had done at the Red Sea, so God again made a passage through the deep wide river for His army to pass through, and it soon reached the city and encamped before it. The soldiers did not begin to fight or try to climb the walls of the city, or to break down the gates. The people of Jericho would have understood that kind of warfare and would have been quite ready to defend themselves. No, the movements of the great army were very strange and difficult to understand. Very silently and in perfect order the men marched round the city in a circling ring, in front the soldiers, then the priests carrying the golden shrine of the Ark of God, then the people following. Not the whispering sound of one single voice came up from that great silent marching host, only the steady tramp of their feet, and the sound of the trumpet call which the priests blew from their horns as they carried the Ark of the Lord.

Day after day passed, and each day the same thing happened. The mighty army marched silently round the city in the same mysterious way. At last came the seventh day, and the uneasy people within the city saw that the enemy was very early astir and that they began their marching at dawn. And this day they did not stop their march. On and on they went until, when they had been round the city seven times, and the priests were blowing their trumpets, a word of command rang out from their general—

"Shout! "

At that word a mighty sound went up from the whole host, a shout that rose to heaven and seemed to shake the very earth. And behold! the walls of the city fell down flat and the gates were broken, and the children of Israel were able to go up and enter in and take the city in God's name. Joshua had done exactly as God directed, and had proved that he was a great leader.



THE TAKING OF JERICO

And in the day of victory the promise made by the spies was not forgotten. The cord bound in the window of the little house was a flag of safety, and there Rahab and her kindred found shelter under its scarlet sign.

CHAPTER XI

GIDEON, THE SOLDIER

The people of Israel were in sore distress. Their smiling land, that land "flowing with milk and honey," was laid waste, they were robbed of their harvests, and they went in terror of their lives. The fierce Midianite robbers had come swarming from the east like a cloud of locusts, and just as locusts devour the green, good land, so these Midianites had overrun the country and devoured everything which their greedy eyes desired and their powerful hands could grasp.

The people who lived in the quiet valleys and plains had fled to the hills for safety, leaving their cornfields and vineyards, and seeking shelter in caves and rocky dens. They dared not try to fight the robbers, for the Midianites far outnumbered them. It was a reign of red terror, as if hungry wolves had come to menace the peaceful land.

There was one man, however, who had not fled before the enemy and who kept on steadily at his work, reaping his corn and gathering in his grapes. This was Gideon, a young landowner who looked after his father's land. He was the youngest of a family of brothers, all of them so tall and straight and strong and good to look at that they might have been the sons of a king.

But of all these brothers Gideon alone was now left. The others had all been killed by the fierce robbers who had invaded the land, and it was his part now to defend the home and carry on the work. He never dreamed of running away and leaving his fair cornfields and terraced vineyards to fall into the greedy, grasping hands of the wolfish enemy. The Midianite robbers would not find him an easy prey when they came. Still he worked cautiously, and when the harvest was gathered in he hid it in a secret cave which he had prepared.

It was a bitter thing to live always in fear of the enemy, and Gideon almost felt as if God had forsaken His people. He knew what wonderful things God had done in the past years, when the people of Israel had escaped from Egyptian slavery: how He had made a passage for them through the Red Sea, and broken down the walls of Jericho before them, and led them into the flowery land of peace and plenty. But why, then, did He work no wonders now, and free them from this dreadful tyranny?

He was thinking these thoughts one day as he toiled near the grove of trees which grew just above his vineyard, when he looked up and saw some one there, sitting under an oak tree. It was a friend and not a foe, for the greeting fell gently on his ear, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour."

Was it a message from God? Perhaps this was an angel messenger, but Gideon answered bitterly, for he did not think that God was with him.

"If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" he asked. "Where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

Quickly then the angel's answer came. It was he, Gideon, who was to show the people that God could still work miracles and that He had not forsaken His people. It was he who should lead them to victory and drive forth the robbers out of the land.

It was a splendid call to arms, and Gideon answered it at once as a soldier obeys the call of his king.

But before fighting the foe there was evil at home to be battled with. The people had been worshipping a false god, and Gideon's first act was to sweep away all that belonged to

that false worship. The indignant people talked of punishment, but even while they spoke news came that more of the robber nations were on their way to harry the land, and this was Gideon's opportunity. Splendid in his youth and strength, king-like in his daring, he stood out before the people and blew a great blast upon his trumpet, calling upon the people to gather themselves together for the defence of their land and to follow him, their captain.

It was a bold thing to think of withstanding that great army which was coming thundering upon its relentless way. Gideon himself knew that it was a forlorn hope unless God was surely on their side. He must make quite certain of that before setting out, so he humbly prayed that God would give him a sign. He would put a fleece of wool out on the ground at night, and if in the morning the fleece was wet with dew while the ground around was dry, then he would know that God had indeed chosen him to lead His people to victory.

The fleece was laid out, and when Gideon came in the morning he found it all soaked with dew, while not a drop had fallen upon the dry hard ground around. Still he wanted to be even more sure, and so again he prayed to God, and asked that this time the fleece might be dry and the dew fall only upon the ground. If this happened he would ask for no other sign, but would believe with all his heart.

Again God listened patiently to His soldier servant, and again He granted his prayer. This time, when in the early morning Gideon went out to find his fleece, it was lying there quite dry, while everything around was heavy with dew.

So now with every doubt at rest Gideon set to work to prepare for battle. The people had answered his trumpet call and had gathered together in thousands; but many of them had come in fear and trembling, and Gideon wanted no cowards or half-hearted men in his army. God was able to save by many or by few, and He meant to show that it was by His arm that the victory would be won. So He bade Gideon tell all the faint-hearted and frightened men to return to their hiding-places,

and all the unfit ones to go home, and at last the army melted away until only three hundred picked men were left to fight the great armies of the Midianites and the Amalekites.

The little army took up its position secretly upon a hill which over-looked the plain where the enemy was encamped; and when night came down and wrapped hill and plain in darkness, God's message came to Gideon and bade him go down secretly, taking his servant with him, to find out what was happening in the camp below.

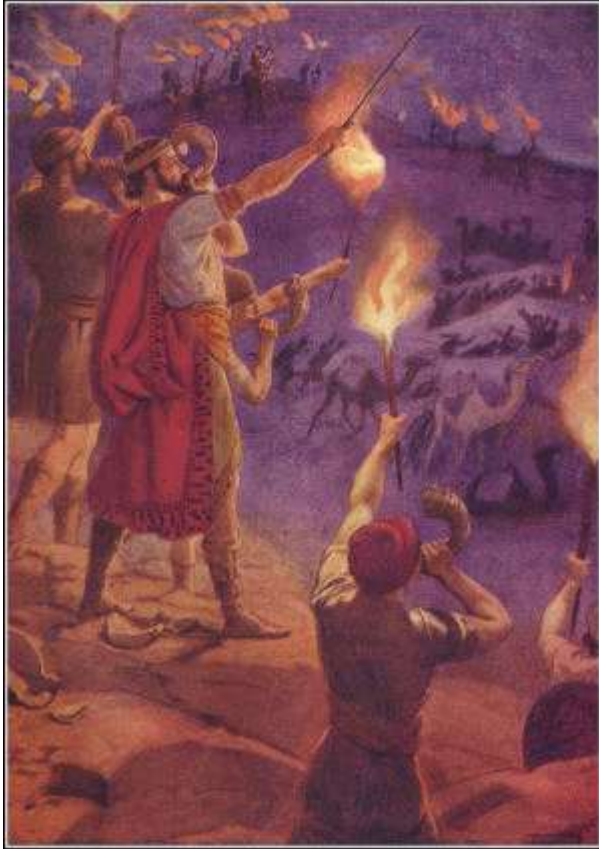
The vast plain was covered with tents; thousands and thousands of camels, on which the robbers had come riding so proudly, were resting there now like a great gray sea stretched out towards the horizon. It seemed as hopeless to think of turning back this great swarm of people as of stopping the incoming tide. But there was no doubt or fear in Gideon's heart.

Very silently in the darkness of the night he stole down the hill and crept closer and closer to the enemy camp. Like two gray shadows he and his faithful servant drew nearer and nearer, until at last they could hear the voices of two men who were talking in one of the dark tents set at the outer edge of the great camp.

The men had both been asleep, and one had been dreaming, but the dreamer had awakened his companion to listen to the frightening dream which had disturbed him. Gideon could distinctly hear his terror stricken voice telling how he had seen a cake of barley bread come rolling down the hill into the camp, where nothing could stop it, until it even reached the royal tent and laid it flat. The man who listened to the dream was terrified too, and declared that it meant the overthrow of their people by the sword of Gideon, that man of Israel who dwelt on the hillside and had defied them.

Gideon had heard enough; and so, as silently as they had come, the two shadows flitted back and climbed up the hill to their camp. There was no time to be lost. Before the

enemy could regain confidence the blow must be struck. Gideon had everything planned for the attack, and now he explained to his men exactly what they were to do.



"THEY BLEW THE TRUMPETS, AND BRAKE THE PITCHERS THAT WERE IN THEIR HANDS."

Each man was to carry in one hand his trumpet, and in the other an empty earthen pitcher with a lighted torch inside. They were to carry these pitchers so that no gleam of light should show, and were to creep quietly down to the edge of the enemies' camp below. Then, when they were all come close to the camp Gideon would blow his trumpet, and at that signal all those three hundred men were to blow their trumpets

too and break the pitchers which they held in their hands, so that the light of the torches should suddenly blaze out. There was only one more order to give, and that was to tell them the battle cry which was to carry them on to victory—

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

Swiftly, then, those three hundred picked men crept down the hill. No mountain mist rolling into the valley could have moved more silently, and not a gleam from the hidden torches lit up the darkness.

There was silence in the great camp below. Sentries had just been changed, and the rest of the army was peacefully sleeping—when suddenly one long clear trumpet call shattered the stillness like the thrust of a spear piercing a solid wall of blackness. Instantly a wild blare of answering trumpets broke in from every side, and the darkness was lit up by hundreds of flaring torches, while a mighty shout rose up to heaven "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

No wonder the enemy in their surprise and terror thought that a great army was upon them. It seemed as if the very night itself was full of fire and crashing sound. They rushed from their tents, they fled this way and that, not knowing friend from foe, but madly hacking their way with their swords in blind terror.

It was a great victory for the Israelites. Both the robber kings were taken and slain, and the people who survived that terrible stampede were driven back into their own land.

Who now in all the land was as great a hero as the brave young captain, the victorious Gideon? The people in their gratitude and devotion were ready to pay him any honour, even to making him their king.

"Rule thou over us," they shouted, "both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian." But Gideon would have none of this. It was to God that the glory was due, and God was their King.

"I will not rule over you," he declared, "neither shall my son rule over you."

And then, like the trumpet call in the great battle, his voice rang out "The Lord, He shall rule over you."



THE CALL OF GIDEON

CHAPTER XII

RUTH, THE GLEANER

Along the hot dusty road that led from the country of Moab to the fair land of Judah three women were walking with bowed heads and weary, halting steps. Their sorrowful, heavy eyes took no pleasure in the summer beauty of the harvest fields, the shimmering silver of the olive trees, and the rich promise of the vineyards which bordered their way. The whole world looked sad to them, seen through a mist of tears.

There behind them, in the land of Moab, each of these women had left green graves, which held all they loved best. Naomi, the eldest, was perhaps the most desolate. Her thoughts went back to the time when she was as young and fair as the two daughters-in-law who walked at her side—when, with her husband and her two boys, she had trod that very road, seeking a home in a strange country to escape the famine which threatened them in her own land. Now she was returning to her native town of Bethlehem a childless, lonely widow.

The younger women, who were the wives of those two dead sons, were very sorrowful too, but for them there might yet be happiness in the world. They still had near and dear relatives and many friends in Moab, which was their native land. They had come far enough now, and it was time for them to return.

"Turn again, my daughters," said Naomi, "and go your way." Their homes lay behind, and she must journey on alone to the little hill town which she had not seen for so many long years. They had kindly come so far to see her on her way, but they must come no farther. So the little party halted, and one of the young women, weeping bitterly, kissed her mother-in-law and turned to go back. But the other one, whose name was Ruth, clung to Naomi, and would not leave her. In vain the

elder woman urged her to return, and pointed out that Orpah had gone, that home and friends and happiness awaited her there, while in front was only poverty and loneliness. Ruth only clung the closer as she sobbed out her tender, loving words.

"Intreat me not to leave thee," she said, "or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

The tender words brought comfort to the heart of Naomi, as soft rain brings refreshment to the hard, dry earth. After all, she was not quite alone; she still had some one to love and care for. So together they journeyed on again, and at last came to the winding road which led up to the town of Bethlehem, nestling like a white bird upon the long ridge of hills.

Naomi knew every step of the way. It seemed almost like a dream to tread once more that winding road, to pass through the city gates and find her way to the little house she knew so well. Although she had been gone so many years there were still people who remembered her, and these came running out to greet her.

"Is this Naomi?" they asked wonderingly.

They could scarcely believe that this sad, broken-down woman could be the pleasant-faced, happy girl who had gone away with her husband and boys in the year of the great famine. But as they listened to her story they did not wonder that she seemed so old and talked so bitterly. It made them look very kindly upon the beautiful girl who kept so close to her mother-in-law, who had given up everything rather than leave her alone.

Naomi had been quite right when she had told Ruth that poverty lay before them. She had come back quite empty-handed, and it was necessary to find some work at once which

would at least provide them with daily bread. Ruth, looking out over the fields where already the barley was being cut, made up her mind to go and work there. The poor were always allowed to follow the reapers and glean the stray ears of corn that fell unnoticed. She might at least gather enough to feed her mother-in-law and herself.

Very happily, then, Ruth set out, and found her way into the harvest field, which belonged to a rich man called Boaz. The reapers treated her kindly when she timidly asked for permission to glean there, and when the master arrived to see how the harvest went, he too noticed her at once, for she was very beautiful.

"Whose damsel is this?" he asked.

There were many people ready to tell him her name, and also to tell him how she had left her land and her people to come with Naomi, her mother-in-law. The story had been repeated all through the town.

Boaz listened with interest. Naomi was his kinswoman, and it was only right that he should help her. He would begin by helping the sweet-faced daughter-in-law who had chanced to come gleaning upon his land. So he went and spoke very kindly to the beautiful Ruth, and told her to come every day to his harvest field and share the reapers' food, and he would see that no one troubled her. He even told the reapers to let some handfuls of corn fall in her way, on purpose, so that there might be plenty for her to glean.

So each day Ruth went back and worked in the harvest fields, and each day as Boaz watched her he grew to love the gentle, loving-hearted woman more and more. And when at last the harvest days were over, he went to Naomi and asked that Ruth might become his wife.

There was no more poverty or hard work now for Ruth or Naomi, no anxious days of wondering how long their flour and oil would last. Boaz was very rich, and nothing was too

good for his fair young wife, whom he had first seen humbly gleaning in his harvest field.

Happiness, too, began to steal back into the life of Naomi. Winter and spring passed, and when harvest time came round once more, all the sorrow and bitterness faded from her heart, for God sent a little child to comfort her. A baby son was born to Ruth, and the whole world seemed full of sunshine and happiness as she laid him in his grandmother's arms, and the two loving hearts rejoiced in their happiness, just as they had clung together in their sorrow.

Of course, they dreamed many happy dreams over the little downy head, and planned a splendid future for the baby, as all mothers and grandmothers will do. But even their dreams never touched the golden reality, for they did not know that he was to be the grandfather of King David, that in this same little town of Bethlehem there was to be born of his line a greater King yet, the King of Heaven.



RUTH AND NAOMI

CHAPTER XIII

SAMUEL, THE LITTLE SERVER

It was some years after Ruth's son had been born in Bethlehem that another mother was made glad by the precious gift of a little son. This mother's name was Hannah, and her baby was a special joy to her because she had so longed to have a son and had prayed so earnestly to God for this great gift.

There was no doubt about the baby's name. He was called "Samuel," which means "God has heard." For had not God listened to his mother's prayers and given her her heart's desire ?

Hannah held her baby close in her arms. He was her very own, and yet he belonged also to God. She had promised, if her prayer was heard, that she would lend him to God, to serve Him in his Holy Temple. Only for a little while could she keep the baby all to herself. The months passed and then the years, and Samuel grew old enough to run about and take care of himself, needing no longer to be carried in his mother's arms. Then the time came that she should take him to Eli, the priest of God, and leave him to be brought up in the Temple and taught to be a servant of God.

Perhaps at first Samuel cried for his mother, for he was only a very little boy, and must have felt strange and lonely without her; but he very soon grew happy again, and learnt to love the old priest and the new life. It was his mother who suffered most. She missed him so sorely, and mothers do not forget as quickly as children do. But although she had lent him to God, he was still hers too; and every year she went back to see him, and through the long months in between, her fingers were busy making him a little coat of a beautiful blue stuff, sewed with a border of exquisite embroidery, blue and purple and scarlet, that was like a wreath of pomegranates. Just as

certain as his birthday came round his mother came and brought with her his little coat, and as he grew bigger every year the coat was bigger too.

Now, as soon as Samuel was old enough he went with Eli, the old priest, into God's house to learn how to help in God's service. Just as we sometimes see now a very little boy helping the priest at God's altar, so Samuel was like a little server as he helped Eli, and he too wore a linen surplice, or ephod, as it was called.

Although he was such a little boy, Samuel already showed that he was straightforward, brave, and obedient, a boy who could be trusted. He did his work faithfully, and when Eli began to grow feeble and his sight became dim, the little server was ready with his clear sight and eager footsteps to be both eyes and feet to the old priest.

But besides growing old and feeble, Eli was also growing more and more unhappy day by day. His two sons were wicked and disobedient, and, what was worse, they were teaching God's people to be wicked too. Eli would not punish them as they deserved, so at last the time came when God took the punishment into His own hands. Only He would warn Eli beforehand, for the old priest was His servant.

So one night God's message came, spoken by God's own voice— spoken not to the great priest, but to the humble little server.

It was evening time. All the work of the day was over, and Eli had gone to rest. The lamp in the temple was burning dimly, sometimes flickering as if it would go out altogether, and leave the holy place in darkness. Samuel, tired with his day's service, was fast asleep, when suddenly he woke up, startled and attentive. Some one had called his name: "Samuel, Samuel."

"Here am I," answered the boy at once. Perhaps the old priest was ill, and wanted him. Hastily Samuel slipped out of bed, and ran to Eli. But the old man was lying there quite

calmly, and when Samuel asked why he had called, he answered quietly, "I called not; lie down again."

It was very strange; but perhaps he had been dreaming, so Samuel went back and crept into bed, and very soon was once more fast asleep. Then again the voice came: "Samuel." This time Samuel was sure it was no dream, and he ran to Eli and cried to him, "Here am I, for thou didst call me."

"I called not, my son," said Eli. "Lie down again."

But when it happened a third time, and the little white figure stood by the priest's bed, declaring positively, "Thou didst call me," Eli suddenly realized that perhaps it was God whose voice the boy had heard.

"Go, lie down," he said gently to the bewildered child, "and it shall be if He call thee that thou shalt say, 'Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.' "

One great lesson Samuel had learnt, and that was to do exactly what he was told, never, questioning. So now he went back to bed without another word.

Did Eli mean that it was the Lord who had called him ? The great God who was so wonderful, whose Ark was in the Holy Place behind the veil of blue and purple and scarlet, guarded by cherubim? He had only seemed like a far-off name to Samuel. Could it really be God's own voice that had called Samuel? If that was so, then the great unknown God must all the time have known the little servant in His house. Then again the voice sounded: "Samuel, Samuel."

This time Samuel was listening with all his might, and obediently his answer rang out fearlessly and clearly—

"Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth."

God knew that His little servant was fit to be trusted with a message, although it was a terrible one; and He told Samuel that a dreadful punishment was to fall upon the old

priest Eli and his wicked sons, and so awful would it be that even the ears of the people who heard about it should tingle.



"SAMUEL ANSWERED, SPEAK; FOR THY SERVANT HEARETH."

There was no more sleep for Samuel that night. God's voice rang in his ears; his heart was filled with the thought that Eli would ask him what God had said, and he would have to tell him that dreadful message.

At last the morning light began to steal in, and it was time to open the doors of God's house. The little server in his linen ephod was at his post as usual, but to-day his shining

morning face was clouded and troubled, and there must have been a look of awe in his clear eyes.

The call he dreaded came all too soon, and for the first time the sound of Eli's voice was unwelcome in his ears.

"Samuel, my son," called the old man.

Immediately Samuel went and stood at his side. "Here am I," he said.

"What is it that the Lord hath said unto thee?" asked Eli. His eyes were very dim, but he felt sure that the boy had a troubled and fearful look. "I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide anything from me of all the things that He said unto thee."

The very worst must be told, and Samuel knew he must hide nothing now. He repeated God's message word for word, and Eli bowed his head as he listened. The poor old priest had been a weak father, but he was a faithful servant, and knew that God was just.

"It is the Lord," he said: "let Him do what seemeth Him good." From that day all things were different to Samuel, and year by year as he grew older he learned more and more to love and serve the God who had spoken to him and trusted him. So also as the years went by the people who worshipped at the Temple began to know that the little child who had been such a faithful server was chosen for a post of great honour—that he had been called, indeed, to be a prophet of the Lord.

CHAPTER XIV

JONATHAN, THE SOLDIER PRINCE

The people of Israel had asked for a king to rule over them, and now they had their wish. "Long live the king!" they shouted, as Saul stood before them, and again, "Long live the king!"

He was such a splendid king, this tall, handsome soldier. He stood head and shoulders higher than any one else, and he looked a veritable leader of men. He was wise, too, and the people felt sure that he would govern as well in times of peace as he would lead them to victory in battle.

Only Samuel, the old priest, looked on at that cheering crowd with sorrowful eyes. He too loved the man whom God had bidden him anoint king; but, after all, he was but an earthly monarch, and it had been God Himself who, up till now, had been the people's king.

Still the shouting went on: "Long live the king!" and there was no doubt but that the people were ready to honour and obey him in everything. They were even willing that a standing army of trained soldiers should be raised and kept ever in readiness to defend their country, instead of the old way of calling up men when they were needed.

Now the army which the king raised was divided into two parts, the greater part of which he kept under his own command, and the smaller half he put under the command of his son Jonathan.

Of all the many good gifts which God had given King Saul, perhaps the greatest of all was this son Jonathan, "the gift of Jehovah," as the name means. He was a son to be proud of, a prince whom any people might love. Like his father, he was tall and handsome, and as brave as a lion, and, best of all, he

had a heart as true as steel. The soldiers under his command were proud to think they were led by the king's son, but they did not know at first what sort of a soldier he would prove to be. He was young, and had still to show what was in him. But very soon the test came, and this is the story of his first great adventure, and how he made a name for himself.

War had been declared between the Philistines and the people of Israel. Indeed, there were few days of peace in those times, for the fierce and mighty Philistines constantly attacked the weaker Israelites, and held them in bondage. For them might was right; the strong should naturally illtreat the weak. All about the country they built garrison strongholds, that they might keep a watchful eye upon Saul's people, and whenever there was a sign of a rising they were at hand to punish those who rebelled. The poor Israelites were not even allowed to have blacksmiths who could make swords and other weapons. If they wanted any of their ploughshares or tools sharpened or mended, they were obliged to go humbly and beg a Philistine smith to do the work.

This was all very bitter to Jonathan, and as soon as he was put in command of his part of the army he determined to strike a blow for his country's freedom. Quite suddenly he appeared with his men before one of 'the Philistines' garrisons, and attacked it so swiftly and with such skill that the Philistines were beaten.

The news spread like wildfire through the land. A victory had been gained; the war of independence had begun. Wild with delight, the people rallied round the king; but their delight was very short-lived. It was rumoured that a vast army was gathered against them to punish them. Thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, besides a countless number of soldiers, were ready for battle, so the rumour ran. How could their little army, numbering at most only three thousand, stand against such a foe? Their courage began to ebb away, and their hearts failed them. Instead of making a brave stand, the men began to desert, and to hide themselves among

the rocks and caves of the mountains. It was a pitiful display of fear and cowardice.

A few men remained loyal and steadfast; but it was a very small army that encamped upon the edge of the valley facing the Philistine armies, where the garrison strongholds towered high on the rocky fastness above. Jonathan looked across at the fortress in front of him, and longed to strike a blow at it. If only that garrison could be conquered there might still be hope, for then the frightened Israelites would return and give battle to the enemy. But how was it to be taken? A strong, watchful enemy kept guard day and night, and it would be impossible to rush his handful of men up that steep, rocky hillside to the attack. No, it could not be done openly. If the place was to be taken at all, it must be done by strategy and not by force. So in his heart he planned a plan.

Saul, the king, sat in the camp under the shadow of a pomegranate tree. He was despondent and sorrowful, as were all the men who still followed him. No one noticed the two figures that stole quietly away, or knew that Jonathan, the king's son, and his armour-bearer had left the camp.

It was no easy task to climb those steep high rocks; but as Jonathan looked upwards at the stronghold of the Philistine garrison he was quite undaunted. It was time now to explain to his armour-bearer what he meant to do, and the lad listened eagerly. It was a splendid adventure. The idea of taking the enemy's fortress single-handed thrilled him, and he was ready to follow his master anywhere. Jonathan had said truly that God could save by many or by few, and was not God on their side?

"Do all that is in thine heart," he answered at once. "Behold, I am with thee, according to thy heart."

Jonathan had chosen his companion well; the boy was afraid of nothing. But the thing must not be done rashly. The soldier prince had thought the plan out well, and he meant to make sure beforehand by a sign that he was doing right.

Now the sign he looked for was this. Together he and his armour-bearer would climb up the rocks until they were within hail of the garrison, and then they would show themselves openly to the men who were guarding the walls. If the enemy should shout out and warn them to come no nearer, then they would give up the adventure, and return. But if they cried out to them to come on, then they would go forward, knowing that their plan would succeed, and that God would help them.



JONATHAN AND HIS ARMOUR-BEARER

Surefooted as the wild goats, and accustomed to climbing, Jonathan and the boy crept higher and higher between the great rocks; and as they at last came in full view of the garrison they stood out and showed themselves.

"Behold, the Hebrews come forth out of the holes where they had hid themselves," scoffed the guard, as they

looked down and saw the two figures standing there. "Come up," they shouted gleefully, "and we will show you a thing."

The sign was given. "Come up after me," said Jonathan to his armour-bearer triumphantly, as he heard the call: "for the Lord hath delivered them into the hand of Israel."

The last climb was the stiffest bit of all, and Jonathan had to use both hands and feet in clinging to the rocks, while above the scoffing garrison waited, ready to teach these bold rebels the lesson they had promised them.

Perhaps they waited too long, or had not calculated what two determined men could do- but almost before they realized their danger, Jonathan had sprung upon them, and was mowing them down with his sword as a sickle mows the grass. Twenty men fell under that terrible sword before they could put up any fight, while the rest of the guard were seized with panic, and turned to flee. This must be but the advance portion of a great attack, they thought; only by flight could they save themselves.

The panic spread throughout the whole army. No one knew quite what had happened. There was a stampede of bewildered soldiers, and, to add to their terror, the earth began to shake with a terrible earth- quake.

Those signs of terror could be seen a long way off. The watchers at Saul's camp were startled as they looked. The whole Philistine army was melting away, like snow before the sunshine. They were flying as fast as they could, beating down each other in their terror as they ran.

Then the word went round that Jonathan was missing from the camp, and his men were sure that this was the work of their soldier prince. They would follow now, and help to chase the flying enemy. From far and near the men who had been in hiding came hurrying back to the ranks and joined in the great pursuit. It was a glorious day of victory and triumph, and only one thing cast a shadow over its joy.

Saul, the king, was afraid that his hungry soldiers might stop to eat food, and so allow the enemy to escape; and therefore he gave a strict order that no one should taste any food until evening, on pain of death. Only it so happened that Jonathan did not hear the order, and when he passed through a wood and saw a honeycomb dripping with golden honey which the wild bees had gathered, he stopped and ate some, for he was faint with hunger. It was not until the evening that he heard of his father's command.

He was sure that the command had been both hard and unwise; but he was a true soldier, absolutely obedient, and ready to submit to authority and take his punishment.

"Tell me what thou hast done," demanded the king, when he and his son stood face to face, after the pursuit of the Philistines was over.

"I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and, lo, I must die," answered Jonathan calmly.

And his father answered, "God do so, and more also: for thou shalt surely die, Jonathan."

Was this to be the end of the great adventure, the reward of that fearful climb and desperate single-handed fight? Was the young leader who had brought deliverance to Israel to be punished by death? No, a hundred times no! The soldiers gathered round him, and stood between him and the king, their eyes flashing, their hands grasping their weapons.

"Shall Jonathan die, who hath wrought this great deliverance in Israel?" they demanded. "God forbid: as the Lord liveth, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground." The king himself should not dare to touch their hero prince. He had proved himself a commander fit to command; he had won not only a great battle, but the love and loyalty of his soldiers' hearts.

CHAPTER XV

DAVID, THE SHEPHERD BOY

The years had gone by since Saul had been made king and the people had shouted so triumphantly, "God save the King!" in their joy at having an earthly ruler set over them. The old priest, Samuel, had grown more and more sorrowful as he watched over the people and saw how often both they and their king did what was wrong in God's sight.

It was true that Saul was mighty in battle and ruled well; but Samuel soon saw that the king was growing proud and self-confident. He boasted himself of his strength, and of the great standing army which he had made, and he forgot that he owed everything to God's help. More and more disobedient and self-willed he became, until at last God's message came to Samuel, telling him that Saul was no longer fit to rule, and another king must be chosen.

Now at that time there lived, in the little hill town of Bethlehem, a man called Jesse, who had eight sons, seven of them tall, strong, grown-up men, and the youngest still a boy, who looked after the sheep in the fields. The people of the little hill town did not trouble themselves much about what was going on in the outside world. There, on the pleasant slopes of the Judean hills, they fed their flocks, and lived their busy, peaceful lives, far away from the noise of strife and battle.

But one day a stir of excitement and fear spread through the town. The people crowded to the city gates and gazed with anxious eyes across the cornfields and pleasant vineyards to where the white road wound like a ribbon up to the town. It seemed strange that they should be so anxious and terror-stricken. No armed enemy band was marching along that mountain road, only an old man could be seen climbing

slowly upwards with weary steps, driving a heifer before him, and carrying a horn of oil in his hand.

But from mouth to mouth passed the word that Samuel, the prophet of the Lord, was on his way to visit the city. The people knew that he was God's messenger, and they feared the message he might bring. Was it a message of peace or of punishment? It was surely one or other, and in their hearts they were afraid that the visit boded them no good.

"Comest thou peaceably?" they asked anxiously, as the old man reached the gates.

To their great relief the old man looked kindly upon them, and answered quietly, "Peaceably: I am come to sacrifice unto the Lord sanctify yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice."

It was to Jesse's house that Samuel made his way to offer the sacrifice; but he went there with another purpose as well. Among those sons of Jesse was one whom God had chosen to be king over Israel, and He had bidden the old priest go and pour the anointing oil upon his head. It was a secret errand, for no word of it must reach Saul's ear, or his vengeance would be swift-winged and sure.

So the feast for the sacrifice was prepared in Jesse's house, and Samuel bade the father call all his sons to the service. They must pass before him one by one, he said.

The first of the sons to stand before Samuel was Eliab, and he was so handsome and strong, and bore himself with such a kingly air, that the old priest felt sure this must be the one God had chosen.

"Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him," murmured Samuel to himself.

But he was mistaken. This was not the king. God does not take count of outside beauty, for He looks at the heart.

So the young man passed on, and one by one his tall, handsome brothers followed; but there was no sign from God to show which was the one He had chosen.



"THERE REMAINETH YET THE YOUNGEST, AND, BEHOLD, HE KEEPETH THE SHEEP."

Samuel was perplexed and troubled. He could not understand what it meant, and he turned to Jesse and asked, "Are here all thy children?"

These were all his grown-up sons that counted, was the father's answer. There was certainly one more, but he was scarcely more than a child, and was out on the hillside tending the sheep.

"Send and fetch him," ordered Samuel at once: "for we will not sit down till he come hither."

So messengers were sent quickly to fetch the boy David, and at last he came hurrying in. He was only a little lad, holding his shepherd's crook in his sun-browned hand as he gazed with wondering eyes at the old priest who had summoned him. His fair face was still flushed with running, his golden hair had been tossed and tangled in the wind, and he seemed to bring in with him the very breath of the hills.

"Arise, anoint him: for this is he," sounded the voice of God in Samuel's heart, and rising slowly, the old man poured the anointing oil upon the sunny head of the little shepherd boy.

Those who looked on were puzzled. Perhaps the elder brothers were envious, and wondered why this mere child should be singled out for such a special favour. No one knew exactly what it meant, but no one thought of questioning God's messenger.

Nothing further happened just then. Samuel returned as he had come, by the winding white road, and before very long his visit was forgotten by the village folk as they settled to their work again.

Only David thought more and more of this strange happening. Alone in the fields all day he pondered over all that had been done, and grew more and more certain that it had been a call from God to do some special piece of work for Him. The wonder of it filled his mind, and he felt God's Spirit within him.

But the thought of something great in the future did not make him neglect the daily common tasks he still had to do. He was as watchful as ever in guarding his sheep from the fierce prowling beasts that lurked around, as quick and brave in defending them. Even in his leisure time he was busy too, and there was not one of the sunny hours of daylight that he wasted.

He loved music, and he taught himself to play upon the harp, practising so carefully and patiently that his fingers grew most wonderfully skilful, and the songs he made were so beautiful that they became famous in all the country round about. He learned, too, to use his shepherd's sling so that he could aim at a mark and hit it every time, and there was no boy in all Bethlehem who was as straight a shot as he was. Whatever was worth doing was, for him, worth doing well. It was no great thing, perhaps, to make music or hit straight; but it was a great thing to do what lay nearest to his hand with all his might. Perhaps some day God might make use of his singing, or might want the services of one who had a quick eye and a sure aim. Who could tell?

At any rate David made up his mind that he would learn well and thoroughly all he could, so that he would be ready whenever God's call should come.



DAVID ANOINTED KING

CHAPTER XVI

DAVID, THE FIGHTER

It was not long before the call came to David; and when it came it found him ready. Saul, the king, still reigned over the people, and still led them to battle; but he was no longer the strong, confident leader, God's chosen servant. Dark hours had come upon him. He sat alone in his tent, his head bowed in sullen misery, a terror to himself and his servants.

"An evil spirit from God troubleth him," whispered the servants one to another. They scarcely dared go near him or speak to him. But at last one ventured to suggest that music might cheer him and help to cast out that evil spirit.

"Let our lord now command thy servants to seek out a man who is a cunning player on an harp: and it shall come to pass, when the evil spirit from God is upon thee, that he shall play with his hand, and thou shalt be well," they said.

Saul caught at this hope at once. "Provide me now a man that can play well, and bring him to me," he said eagerly.

Now where should they find this maker of music? Why, of course, said one of the servants, we must send and fetch the shepherd boy David, the son of Jesse, for they say he has wonderful skill, and can not only play the harp, but himself makes the songs which he sings.

So the shepherd boy was brought to the king's darkened tent, and came into the gloom like a ray of sunlight, his harp in his hand, its strings all twined with lilies to shield them from the fierce burning sun, which might warp them.

"God's child, with His dew
On thy gracious gold hair, and those lilies still living and blue,
just broken to twine round thy harp strings, as if no wild heat
Were now raging to torture the desert."

In that darkened tent David could but dimly see the great form of the king, crouching there with bowed head, and he longed to help him. As he took his harp and began to play, all his heart was in his music, and into the blackness he brought the wild freshness of the sunlit hills, the call to the sheepfold, the happy song of workers in the fields, the music of birds in the cool, green woods. And the sweet music acted like a charm; the misery was lifted from Saul's heart, and the evil spirit was put to flight by the song of the shepherd boy.

So God made use of David's skill in music, and before very long there came another call, this time for one who had a quick, well-trained eye and a steady hand, one who could aim straight and true.

The country was in danger. The fierce Philistines had come out in battle array again to conquer the land, and they were so mighty and so strong that the armies of the Israelites seemed helpless before them. On either side of a narrow valley, divided by a stream which ran below over smooth stones, the armies were encamped, like wild beasts ready to fly at each other's throats. Every man who was old enough to fight was there, and David's elder brothers had joined the army to defend their country. David himself was still but a boy, and must stay at home; but one day, to his joy, he was sent by his father to carry food and gifts from the Bethlehem farm to his brothers on the field of battle.

It was a wonderful sight to see those great armies covering the steep hillsides. David could only gaze at them spellbound; and as he was looking there was a stir in the enemy's camp, and a mighty challenge sounded across the narrow valley. Out of the Philistine ranks stepped a giant warrior, so tall, so terrifying in his great strength, that he seemed to dwarf the hills around him. His voice, too, was like the sound of a mighty trumpet.

"Choose you a man for you," came the ringing challenge, "and let him come down to me. If he be able to fight with me, and to kill me, then will we be your servants: but if I

prevail against him, and kill him, then shall ye be our servants, and serve us. I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together."

David looked eagerly on the ranks of his own side. Surely the challenge would be answered at once. Some man would spring forward then and there to force the words back into the boaster's throat.

But a great silence reigned. No one moved or spoke. David's cheek burned with shame. What were his people doing to allow a heathen Philistine to defy the armies of the living God? Eagerly he asked the soldiers of the camp what it meant, and he was told that the Philistine giant, Goliath, uttered that challenge twice every day, and no man was found brave enough to dare to go out and give him battle. It could not have been pleasant for those soldiers to meet the astonished, indignant look that blazed from the eyes of the little shepherd boy, and David's brothers were very angry with him.

"Why camest thou down hither?" one of them asked, "and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle."

But David was quite ready to act as well as to ask questions. He would go out to meet this giant, and would fight him for the honour of God and his country.

"Thou art not able to go out against this Philistine to fight with him," said Saul, when David was brought to him: "for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war."

It seemed madness to think of this slender boy standing out as champion against the mighty soldier; but David answered steadily and wisely. He was strong and skilful, he said, and had once fought a lion and a bear single-handed when they had tried to rob his flock.

"The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine," he ended, with triumphant confidence.



"THE PHILISTINE AROSE, AND CAME AND DREW NIGH TO MEET DAVID."

It was an echo of the confidence which Saul had once felt himself in the old days when his whole trust had been in God, and he recognized the true ring of the boy's courage.

"Go," he said, "and the Lord be with thee."

Then they began to bring out heavy armour and a great sword with which David might defend himself; but he would

have none of them. He could not move freely, cased in armour, and he had never learned how to use a sword. No, he would do his best with the only weapon which he thoroughly understood.

So in his shepherd's coat and his sling in his hand he set out to cross the dividing brook, and, in passing, to fill his wallet with smooth stones fit for his purpose. Then with springing steps he began to climb the opposite side.

The rage of Goliath was great when he saw this fair-faced boy, without either armour or sword coming so boldly to meet him.

"Am I a dog," he thundered, "that thou comest to me with staves?" "I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied," rang out the clear answer. "The Lord saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into, our hands."

The great giant in wrath poised his spear, ready with one blow to put an end to this unequal fight. But David did not wait to come within reach of the spear. Long before Goliath could reach him he stopped, fitted a stone carefully into his sling, and let fly. The stone whizzed through the air, straight as an arrow, and hit the giant fair in the middle of his forehead. The huge figure swayed and fell, and David, running forward, seized the Philistine's sword and cut off his head.

So God's people were saved, and so God again made use of the shepherd boy's skill and training. Many adventures still awaited David before he became king, as Samuel had promised; but always, in every danger and difficulty, he was ready to do God's bidding, just as he had done his duty faithfully when he tended his sheep on the hills of Bethlehem.

CHAPTER XVII

SOLOMON, THE WISE KING

It is a wonderful thing to be a king. Solomon, David's son, knew this well. To be a real king, a great ruler and guide, a man must be just and wise and strong. And here was he. Solomon, but newly come to man's estate, called to sit upon the throne and carry on the work of his father David. To him was to be given the great task of building God's house and ruling His people. The hands of David had been stained with blood, for he had been a great fighter; and so God had not allowed him the honour of building that temple. Solomon, the young king, whose very name meant "peace," could at least bring clean, unstained hands to the work.

But how was he to learn to be wise enough and strong enough to rule and govern God's chosen people—to be a real king? The great responsibility weighed heavily, and the question troubled him, even in his dreams, until at last one night the answer came. He had laid down to rest as usual, and had fallen asleep, when in the midst of his dreams he heard a voice speaking to him. He listened, and knew at once that it was the voice of God.

"Ask what I shall give thee," said the Voice. Solomon was not startled or afraid. David, his father, had taught him to love and trust God, and he answered at once.

"O Lord my God," he said, "Thou hast made Thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad."

It was wisdom that Solomon wanted more than anything else, and his answer pleased God. He might so easily

have asked instead for a long life or for great riches, or triumphant victory over all his enemies; but because he had chosen well, God granted his request.



"THE KING TURNED HIS FACE ABOUT, AND BLESSED ALL THE CONGREGATION OF ISRAEL."

"Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart," said the Voice: "so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days."

While that Voice still sounded in his ears Solomon awoke. Had it indeed been only a dream? It had been something more than that, he knew. Everything was changed. All his doubts and difficulties had vanished. He was sure of himself, and was no longer afraid of fulfilling the duties of a king. And ere long the change was noticed by others too as the young king began to rule.

The first case he was called upon to judge was a difficult one.

Two women stood before him: one, with angry, flashing eyes, held in her arms a little dead baby; the other, whose face was full of sorrowful pleading, clasped to her breast a living child.

The angry woman pushed forward and spoke first. They both lived in the same house, she said, and in the night that other woman's child had died, and she had crept out and changed the babies, carrying away the living child, and leaving the dead baby in its place.

"No, no," said the other woman, holding the living baby closer in her arms, "the child is mine, the dead one is thine."

The angry woman would not listen; the living child belonged to her, she declared again.

All eyes were turned on the young king. How would he decide? There was no possible way of finding out the truth.

"Bring me a sword," rang out the order.

In great astonishment they brought a sword and placed it in the king's hand.

"Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other," he said calmly.

The woman with the sorrowful eyes sprang forward, and a great cry burst from her lips: "O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it."

But the angry woman was more than content, and her voice drowned the other's as she cried: "Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it."

The king looked down on the little helpless baby and on the sword in his hand. Of course, he did not mean to hurt the child. It was only a wise test, and it had answered well. With a kindly glance at the poor, weeping woman, he gave his judgment.

"Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it," he said: "she is the mother."

He knew that a real mother would rather give up her child than have it killed; and it was only a pretended mother who could ask to have it cut in half.

So Solomon's wisdom began early to be proved, and the people grew very proud of their wise young king. Never before had the country been as rich and prosperous as under his rule, and very soon the work of building that great temple of God's house was begun.

It would take a whole book to tell of the building of that wonderful place, of the gold and silver and precious stones, of the beautiful wood and marbles and ivory that went to make it the wonder of the world. But at last it was finished, and when it was dedicated to God King Solomon stood forth in all his kingly robes, and amidst the splendour of the great festival spoke words of great wisdom to the people.

Far and wide the fame of Solomon spread. People talked of his riches and the splendour of his court, but, above all, of his great wisdom. From far away Sheba the dark queen came with her great train of camels laden with gold and precious stones, to see for herself if this king was as great and wise and rich as people said. She meant to test him with difficult questions, and she also wished to show him that she too possessed great riches.

But the wealth and splendour of Solomon's court went far beyond her dreams. She saw him arrayed in his royal purple robes, sitting upon his ivory throne overlaid with gold, each ivory step guarded by a golden lion. She listened to his quick, wise answers to all her puzzling questions, and she could only hold out her hands to him in deep humility, and confess that there were no words to describe his glory.

But all these riches and all this splendour and honour could not make Solomon a contented or happy man. His great navies swept the seas, and brought him cargoes of rich silks, of gold and silver and ivory, apes and peacocks, horses and mules, and everything that heart could desire, but they could not bring him happiness. At the end of his life, weary of pleasures and of learning, he called all these things "vanity of vanities." Looking back to the time when he was an eager boy, when God's voice had spoken to him in that long-ago dream, he knew now that there was something even better than the wisdom he had asked for.

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter," wrote the weary old king, he who had enjoyed every pleasure of life, with all its honour and glory, all its wisdom and learning. "Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."

CHAPTER XVIII

ELIJAH, THE HUNGRY PROPHET

There was a great famine in all the land, the famine which God had sent to punish King Ahab and the people for their wickedness. Month after month went by, and not a drop of rain fell, not a cloud hid the burning sun by day, no dew softened the dry parched earth by night. The grass was burned up, there was not a green blade to be seen in all the fields, no growing plant anywhere.

Elijah the prophet stood by the side of the little brook Cherith, and saw that the bed of the stream was dry; not a trickle of water ran over the stones now. For three years he had lived there in hiding, after warning King Ahab that the famine was coming. He had been kept alive all that time by the little silver brook and the food which God had sent him by strange messengers. No white-robed angels came to feed him; but instead, every morning and every evening, he heard the flutter of wings, and there flew down to him great black ravens carrying in their beaks bread and meat for his morning and evening meals.

But now the stream was dry and the ravens were dead. There was nothing left to eat or drink, and the rain would not come yet for many months. Still, Elijah was not greatly troubled. He was hungry, but he knew that God, whom he faithfully served, would feed him in some way. Standing there by the dried-up brook, he waited, and in the stillness God's message came to him, and bade him go to a certain town where there was some one ready to feed him and take care of him.

Through the desolate burnt-up country Elijah journeyed, and when he reached the city to which God had directed him, he found hunger and misery everywhere. Still he

went on, until he saw a poor widow woman, who with weary, bent back was stooping to gather a handful of dried sticks outside her little house. She lifted her head in surprise as Elijah spoke to her.



ELIJAH AND THE RAVENS

"Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink," he said.

Surely he must know how precious every drop of water was now. How could the stranger calmly ask for a drink? Still, he looked very weary and travel worn, and she thought she might spare him a little water. She turned to fetch the water, and again she heard his voice.

"Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand."

Why, he spoke as if she had only to stretch out her hand and take bread from her cupboard. "A morsel of bread"—when she was starving for want of food, she and her little son, waiting there indoors now for the last meal they expected to eat. There was but a handful of flour in the barrel, a few drops of oil in her cruse, and she had gathered the sticks to make a fire and bake a little cake. After that there was nothing to do but die of hunger.

"As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake," she said, gazing at the stranger. She saw now that he was a prophet. But how could she feed him? She could only explain that there was nothing in the house but the handful of meal and the few drops of oil.

"Fear not," came Elijah's answer; "go and do as thou hast said but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth."

Was this man indeed a prophet? Did he truly bring a message from God? At any rate, she would do as he asked; and the woman hurried into the house, and with trembling hands she mixed and baked the little cake for the waiting stranger. Then she went again to look into the empty barrel. But there, at the bottom, was still a handful of meal, and in the cruse there was just as much oil as there had been before.

No fear of famine need haunt her now. There was always enough for her and her little son and the man of God who had come to lodge with her, and who slept in the loft under the roof. Every time she went to the barrel she found the meal there, and her heart was filled with thankfulness that she had not been greedy and selfish, but willing to share all she had with some one else who was also hungry. And it was not only food which she received as a reward from God, but later on also the life of her little son, in answer to His servant's prayer.

Not very long after this God sent once more the blessed rain to water the earth, and all the country rejoiced in peace and plenty. Only for Elijah there was no peace. The wicked people hated him, because he told them of their faults and of God's anger. They hunted him like a wild beast, and again he had to hide himself amongst the rocks and caves of the wilderness. Weary and disheartened, he lay there, and he almost began to lose his faith in God's care. He had been a failure, he thought; he did not want to live any longer. He forgot how God had fed him by those ravens; how he had been kept alive by the miracle of the widow's barrel of meal and cruse of oil. He was weary and hungry alone there in the wilderness, where he had crawled under the shelter of a juniper tree, and he only asked to die.

"O God, take away my life," he prayed, as he wearily closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Suddenly there was a light touch on his arm, and Elijah awoke. Was he dreaming, he wondered, or had his enemies tracked him out? He looked round, scarcely caring, and there at his side stood an angel.

"Arise and eat," said the shining messenger. He looked around bewildered, and there close by he saw a cake and a bottle of water. God had again sent to feed His hungry servant. He was too dazed to think; he could only stretch out his hand for the food, and, when he had eaten it, fall asleep once more.

Again came the touch, and again the angel pointed to another meal prepared for him, and afterwards in the silence God spoke to him, and put fresh courage into his heart.

So Elijah was strengthened once more to go on and finish the work God had set him to do, and when the end came it was no weary, disheartened man whom God called home. It was victory and not failure which wrapped him round as God's fiery chariot bore him upwards, never to know pain or hunger, sickness or sorrow again.

CHAPTER XIX

ELISHA, THE MAN OF GOD

The days of Elijah the prophet were ended, but Elisha, his faithful servant, was ready to carry on his work. He knew that, as God had helped the master, so would He continue to help the servant.

Now it so happened that as Elisha travelled backwards and forwards on his way doing God's work, he came to a place called Shunem; and there, as he often passed a certain house, a kind-hearted, rich woman noticed him, saw how weary and footsore he looked, and invited him to come in and rest. Each time he came she had a meal prepared for him, and she wondered if he had any home, and if it might not be possible for her to do something more for him.

"Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually," she said to her husband. "Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither."

So the little room was all prepared and ready, with its bed and table and stool and candlestick, and the next time that Elisha passed by she not only fed him, but invited him to rest in the little room which was to be his very own.

The kindness of the woman touched Elisha's heart, and he made up his mind that he would show her how grateful he was. Was there anything she specially wanted? he asked. As God's prophet, he had a certain power in the country and at the king's court. But the woman only shook her head. She wanted no honours; she was quite happy and contented in her own home.

"What, then, is to be done for her?" he asked his servant.

The servant knew all about the household, and answered at once that there was one thing which the woman wanted with all her heart, and which she did not possess, and that was a child.



"BEHOLD, THOU HAST BEEN CAREFUL FOR US WITH ALL THIS CARE."

Then Elisha called for the woman, and when she came and stood at the door he told her that God Himself would reward her for her kindness by sending her a little son.

It had been a happy home before, but it was twice as happy when the baby came. He was the only child, and the joy of his mother's heart. His father, too, was very proud of him, and when the boy

grew old enough he would take him out into the fields when he went to look after the workers.

But one harvest day, when his father had taken him out to watch the reapers cut the golden corn, the boy began to complain of the hot sun, which was beating down with such burning heat. "My head, my head!" he cried to his father.

"Carry him to his mother," said the master to one of his servants. His mother would put everything right.

But the poor mother could do nothing to make him well again. She could only hold him on her lap and try to soothe the pain and cool the little hot head, while she watched him grow worse and worse, until at mid-day he died.

In her bitter grief his mother thought of Elisha, the man of God. He had promised her that the little son should be given to her. He might help even now.

With tender, careful hands she laid her child upon Elisha's bed in the little room, and then set out to find the prophet.

She was still some way off when Elisha caught sight of her. The moment he saw her he was sure she was in some trouble; and he sent his servant to meet her and to ask, "Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child?"

And to all the questions the woman answered steadily, "It is well." But when she came up to Elisha and looked into his kind face, she bowed her head in her bitter grief and knelt

down at his feet. Why had this happened? she asked. She had not asked for a son; why should she have been given the joy only to suffer the greater pain? Elisha understood at once, and at once was ready to help her. He gave his staff to his servant and bade him go on quickly ahead and lay it upon the child's face. But although this was done, yet there was no sign of life in the child.

"The child is not awaked," said the servant when his master and the mother arrived.

Then Elisha went alone into the little room and prayed to God. And God heard his prayer. As he held the child close to him, he felt the cold little body grow warm, and then came the sound of faint breathing, and the child opened his eyes.

Outside the mother was waiting patiently, and her trust was rewarded. Elisha called to her and put the living child into her arms, and she knelt there at his feet, so full of joy and gratitude that she could not even thank him. She had been sure the man of God would help her, and she blessed the day when she had in the kindness of her heart made that little room ready to welcome the stranger, who had returned her kindness with good measure pressed down and overflowing.

CHAPTER XX

HEZEKIAH, THE GOOD KING

Very great and very strong were the heathen kings who ruled in Assyria. It was no wonder that the people of Judah lived in terror of those heathen kings, and that they forgot sometimes that, though the Jews were such a small, weak nation, they had a great Defender, and that God would protect His people.

There had been many bad kings in Judah who had forgotten God and brought evil on the city of Jerusalem. But now a new king had come to the throne, and as the people shouted, "God save the king," they hoped he would be strong and courageous and keep them safe from their heathen enemies.

Hezekiah, the new king, was a young man, but he was wise and brave, and, best of all, he trusted God with all his heart. The kings before him had been afraid of the great armies of the Assyrians, and had, in their fear, paid money or tribute every year to the heathen king, which really made them vassals or servants. Hezekiah would not do this.

"We serve the Lord God," he said, "and not the kings of Assyria." But did the people really serve God? The king looked at the beautiful Temple, God's house, and there were no priests there, no service going on. The doors were shut. There was dust and ruin everywhere. The golden lamps had gone out, and were hanging all tarnished and dim; there was no sweet scent of incense, no sacrifice to God.

That was bad enough, but it was a sign of something worse. The people had become careless, their faith in God had grown dim; they had shut the door of their hearts against Him, had forgotten all His goodness to them, and had covered themselves with sin, as the dust that lay thick on His altar.

Then Hezekiah set to work suddenly to sweep away the evil from the Temple and from the hearts of the people. In a few days the Temple was cleaned and made beautiful once more; the people were warned that if they forgot God He would cease to be their defender, and were bidden to come to a great service in the Temple to ask for forgiveness and help.



HEZEKIAH REOPENS THE TEMPLE

The wise king did not stop there. He knew that God would help them, but they must also help themselves. So he ordered the walls of Jerusalem to be built up and made strong. And he stored up food, and made a wonderful underground channel to bring water into the city.

And it was well that this was done: for ere long the news came that Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, was on his way to punish the king for refusing to pay tribute and be his vassal.

The news, brought in by the poor country people, who were fleeing from their burning villages, struck terror to the hearts of the people of Jerusalem. They knew what a terrible man this King of Assyria was. He was as strong as a lion and as cruel as a tiger, and his army was so mighty that no one could stand against it. Far away on the horizon they could see the smoke of the burning villages, rolling nearer and nearer as the conquering army swept on. Who was to help them now? Even Hezekiah's courage failed him for a while. He tried to make peace by promising to give all his gold and all the treasures of the Temple to Sennacherib. He sent secretly to ask the mighty Egyptians to help him. But it was all of no use. The whole country of Judah was laid waste, and still the army marched on to destroy Jerusalem. It was but a little thing for such a powerful army to do. They would sweep it away as easily as a child sweeps a fly off the wall.

Sennacherib laughed at the very idea that Hezekiah would dare to stand up and fight against him.

"I have shut him up as a bird in a cage, in his royal city of Jerusalem," he wrote boastfully.

All day long the people in Jerusalem watched with terrified eyes for the great armies that were marching, marching onwards. The sound of their feet was like thunder from the hills, the sheen of their spears like blinding lightning.

But it was then that Hezekiah's courage returned. In the time of greatest danger he remembered God's promise. The people were crouching in fear, but the king's voice sounded out clear and strong above their cries of terror and the weeping of the women.

"Be strong and courageous," he cried; "be not afraid nor dismayed for the King of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that are with him: for there is more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles."

Those brave words cheered the people. But all night long they watched from the walls: perhaps the great army was resting; the attack would come in the morning.

The morning dawned, and the watchers still looked out with straining eyes. But as the light grew stronger they saw that something strange had happened. There was no attack. God had indeed fought their battle. The Angel of Death had passed over the camp, and the dead lay there in thousands. God's angels had stood between them and the enemy and had saved them, as God's angels can always do. Hezekiah had done well to bid them put their trust in the Lord their God.

"The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

"Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen;
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

"For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed on the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever were still!

"And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

"And there lay the rider, distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

"And the widows of Asshur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord."

CHAPTER XXI

JEREMIAH THE PROPHET

In the little village of Anathoth, not very far from Jerusalem, a boy was learning his lessons and playing his games, very much like other boys, except perhaps that, as he was the son of a priest, he had more difficult lessons to learn and less time for play.

Jeremiah, for this was the boy's name, was quick to learn. He knew all about the history of his people and how God had led them and helped them, and as he grew bigger and stronger two things grew greater and stronger in his heart as well-his love for his country and his love for God.

Then one day a wonderful thing happened. God's message came to him telling him he was to be God's messenger, who was to go and speak to the people of his nation. It must have been an awesome moment for the boy when he first heard God's voice; but Jeremiah found words to answer, although they were halting and rather fearful.

"Ah, Lord God!" he said, "behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child."

But God's message came again clear and plain. "Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee."

And even as Jeremiah listened, God's finger was laid upon his mouth, and the message was written in his heart.

He was alone when he heard God's, voice. Perhaps he was in one of the village gardens which lay bleak and bare in the wintery light, and then suddenly a beautiful sight caught his eye. It was an almond tree, covered with pure white blossoms, called in his language "the waker," because it wakes

up and puts out its flowers when all the other trees and plants are still in their winter sleep.

"Jeremiah, what seest thou?" came God's voice again.

"I see a rod of an almond tree," answered Jeremiah.

He had been feeling rather bewildered, and longed for a sign that he was indeed to be God's messenger, and this was the sign God sent. As the white almond blossom was awake while everything else seemed dead or sleeping, so God said that He, the great Waker or Watcher, would fulfil every one of His words. After that God taught him by another sign that evil days were in store for his country: that a heathen nation would come sweeping down from the north, and would destroy Jerusalem and carry the people away captive.

This, then, was the message which Jeremiah was to carry to the people to warn them that God would punish them for all their wrongdoing. It was a hard message to take; the people, he knew, would be very angry, and his own heart was heavy with sorrow to think that all this evil was to happen to his beloved land.

But no better messenger could have been chosen. He was quite fearless and steadfast as a rock. Nothing could stop him from his work or tempt him to keep silence.

At first, however, things were not so difficult for the young prophet. The good King Josiah was reigning, and he had tried to make the people give up their idols and all their evil ways, and he was glad that Jeremiah should bring God's message and cry it aloud.

But the more the people listened, the more angry they became. They hated to be told that God meant to punish them, and yet they would do nothing to show Him that they wanted Him to forgive them.

Instead of that they planned how they could silence the voice that spoke the message; and so Jeremiah was obliged to

flee away from his own village and hide himself from those who wanted to kill him.

Then followed more evil days. The good King was killed in battle, all he had tried to do was swept away, and the people needed God's warning message more than ever.

And the message came. One day a strange figure appeared in the streets of Jerusalem. The people knew from his robe that he was a priest, but why did he wear such a dirty, ragged girdle? A man's girdle was the chief part of his dress, and it was a shame to the city that a priest should be seen in the streets wearing one as soiled and torn as that. Then the man in the ragged girdle began to speak to them, and his words were like whips. The soiled, unlovely girdle was like the people themselves, he said. God had meant them to be clean and beautiful; and instead, they were stained with their ugly sins, not fit to belong to God. Would nothing make them repent and turn to God? Then, suddenly, he took a clay jar and dashed it to pieces on the rock.

"Look," he cried, "that is how God will break you and your city."

But it was all of no use. The people first scoffed and then grew angry, and in their rage they seized Jeremiah and put him in the stocks where all the passers-by might mock at him.

"See the mad prophet!" they cried in derision.

It was easy to laugh at the prophet, but in a very short time a feeling of uneasiness began to spread amongst the people of Jerusalem. It looked as if there might be truth in the prophet's warning. From the north came news that the King of Babylon was marching on his conquering way, and who knew where he would stop?

There was no warning voice crying in the streets of Jerusalem now. Jeremiah was shut up by the king's order, but even in prison he was writing the message which he could no

longer cry aloud. And when the message was written it was carried to the king.

Now the king was sitting in his winter palace and a fire was burning on the hearth when the prophet's message was read to him. And, like his people, he would not listen. In a great rage he seized the roll of writing and cut it in pieces with a penknife, and then threw the pieces into the fire to be burned.

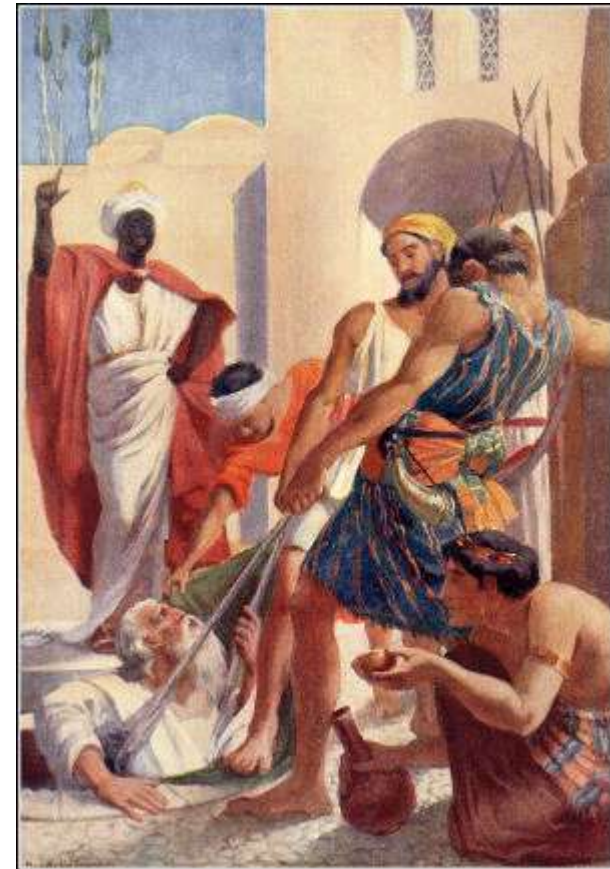
Again it was easy enough to destroy the message, but that did not serve to stop the punishment that was coming nearer and nearer. Jerusalem could not hold out against the mighty hosts of Babylon which came sweeping on to overwhelm it, and ere long the people were taken captive and carried away to distant Babylon. Only a poor little remnant was left behind.

It might have been thought that those who were left would have listened now to God's messenger as he still cried to them to repent and to look forward to the time when the captives would return and God would remember His promise to set on the throne of David the King of all the earth. But it was not so. More hardships were in store for Jeremiah. He was an old man now, worn out with suffering and great sorrow; but to silence him once for all, he was lowered into a horrible pit which had been dug in the courtyard of the palace to drain off the rain water. There was not enough water in it to drown him, but there was deep wet mud at the bottom, and into this he sank; and they left him there, without food, to die.

But he was not to die yet. A slave of the court who loved him managed to get a rope and some old rags, and these he lowered into the pit, bidding Jeremiah put the rags as pads under his arms and then slip the cords over them, ready to be drawn up.

His life was saved, but only to endure fresh sorrows and suffering. Again Jerusalem was besieged, and this time when the conquerors left the city was laid in ruins, the walls

were broken down, and the beautiful temple was burned to the ground, while the old prophet was carried away from the land which he loved to die in a strange country among a strange people.



"SO THEY DREW UP JEREMIAH WITH CORDS."

Was his life a failure? It seemed so in man's eyes, but God who had shown him the sign of the white almond rod, God the Waker and Watcher, looked down upon the work of His messenger and was satisfied, for "he that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORY OF DANIEL

The words which Jeremiah the prophet had spoken long years ago had come true. The people of Babylon, that great heathen city, had taken Jerusalem, had thrown down its walls, laid the temple in ruins, seized all its treasures, and carried off its people captive.

Now among the people carried off to be slaves there were several young princes of the royal house of Judah, and one of these princes was Daniel, the hero of this story.

Daniel was quite a boy when he was taken away to Babylon, and although he was a prisoner he was not treated as an ordinary slave. He was trained and taught at the king's court to be a special kind of servant, one who was to "stand before the king."

It was a wonderful court, and a wonderful country where he received his training. The great walls round the city were so wide that chariots drawn by four horses could drive round the top of them, and there was even room enough for the horses to turn. Inside the walls the city was like a garden of delight, green with parks and forests, gay with beautiful flowers, and sweet with the scent of spices.

But more wonderful still was the king's palace, set high in the middle of the city, built on terraces of flower gardens and crowned with the temple of the Sun-god whom these people worshipped. There it rose, building upon building, all of different colours—orange, crimson, gold, yellow, blue, and silver—and at the top a silver shrine, almost too dazzling to look upon.

It was a very rich country, too, where cornfields spread their gold in the sunshine, and harvests could be gathered in

several times a year, where the air was always soft, and where, if there was not enough rain, the thirsty land was watered by innumerable canals.

But although it was all so fair and rich, Daniel never forgot his own beloved country—never forgot to look towards Jerusalem when he said his prayers to God; and never once did he worship the Sun-god at that silver shrine.

And as he grew to be a man, the people of the court began to know that he was always to be trusted, that he was not only very clever but straight and true and fearless. It was for Daniel that the king called when he was in trouble and wanted to know the meaning of his dreams. It was Daniel only who could read the strange writing on the wall, which warned the people of Babylon that an enemy king would soon take the city and rule there.

Then, when the warning came true and the strange king, whose name was Darius, had taken the city, Daniel was still a favoured man, although the golden city was almost destroyed.

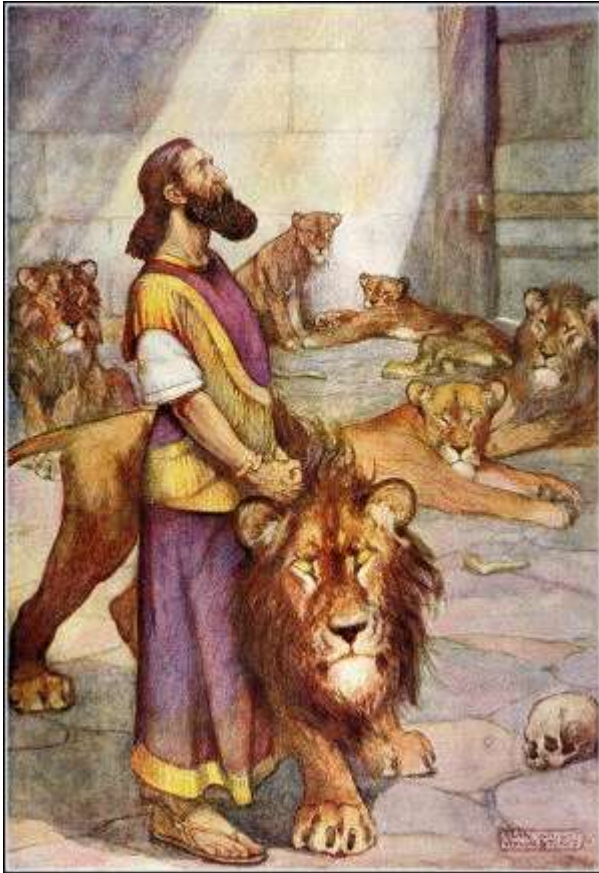
King Darius quickly discovered that Daniel was the wisest of all his servants, and the one who was most to be trusted; so he made him a governor of the land, and gave him many honours.

But the other people of the court did not like this. They were jealous of this man whom the king honoured, and they soon began to hate him and to lay cunning plans to get rid of him.

Very carefully they watched him day by day, and tried secretly to find out if there was not something crooked about his ways. But it was no use: Daniel was absolutely straight, and as faithful to the king as he was to God.

Faithful to God! Ah! his faithfulness was the one thing they might use against him; there lay the one way in which they might hurt him.

So these cunning men went to the king, and asked him to make a new law, forbidding any one to ask a favour of any god or man, except the king, for thirty days, and threatening that whoever did so should be thrown into the den of lions.



"GOD HATH SENT HIS ANGEL, AND HATH SHUT THE LIONS' MOUTHS."

The king was quite flattered, and very willingly set his seal to the new law. He never thought there was anything underhand about it, or dreamed that the wicked men were planning something evil.

But Daniel knew at once what it meant. It was a trap set specially for him. Either he must give up his daily prayers to God, or be thrown to the lions.

He did not hesitate one instant. He did not even say his prayers secretly where no one could see him. Instead of that, he opened his window wide, the window which looked in the direction of Jerusalem; and he knelt at the open window in full view, and prayed to God three times a day, as he had always done before.

Of course, the wicked men were watching for this, and they were overjoyed at the success of their plan. They did not lose a moment, but went straight to the king.

"Hast thou not signed a decree," they said, "that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?"

"The thing is true," answered the king, "according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not."

Then the men triumphantly told their story. Daniel, the king's favourite, had disobeyed the king's law, and had prayed to his God, not once, but three times a day.

Then the king was very sorry, and very angry with himself, and he tried to think of every possible way to save Daniel.

But there was no way. Daniel had disobeyed the law, and the punishment must follow. When the king's seal was once set to a law, it could not be broken, even by himself. So in the evening Daniel was brought out to be cast into the lions' den, and the king's heart was heavy with sorrow. Only one faint gleam of hope there was.

"Thy God whom thou servest continually, He will deliver thee," he said, as he bade Daniel a sorrowful farewell.

But although he spoke such brave words, his heart was very heavy, and his hope was dim. He saw Daniel lowered into

the den, he put his seal upon the stone which was laid upon the mouth of the den, and then he returned to his palace so full of grief that he could neither sleep nor eat, but lay awake all night, watching for the morning to come.

Meanwhile, down in the dark den, Daniel was fearlessly waiting for death. He was quite ready to die if it was God's will. He waited for the great, fierce beasts to spring at him in the darkness; he listened for the sound of their feet. But instead there was the sound of an angel's wings, and the light of an angel's face shone in the darkness. And when he looked at the prowling beasts, lo! their mouths were shut by the angel's hand, and they could do him no harm.

So in the early morning, as the first gleam of light shone in the sky, when the king came hurriedly to the mouth of the den and cried, with a bitter cry of sorrow, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?" the answer came clear and strong from the depths below

"O king, live for ever. My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before Him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt."

CHAPTER XXIII

QUEEN ESTHER

There was a great stir in the palace of Shushan, the beautiful palace which King Darius, the friend and master of Daniel, had built. King Darius was dead now, and Ahasuerus sat upon the throne of Babylon; and he had just chosen for his queen, Esther, the Jewish maiden, one who belonged to that race of people who had been carried away captive from Jerusalem.

It was little wonder that Ahasuerus had chosen her as his queen, for there was no other maiden in all the land as beautiful as she was; and he was one of those selfish, greedy kings who want everything that pleases their eyes. And Esther's beauty pleased Ahasuerus more than all the riches and treasures he possessed. He did not know she was a Jewess—it would not have troubled him if he had known; but Mordecai, her kinsman, had bade her keep that a secret.

It was Mordecai who had brought up the little orphan Jewish girl, and she obeyed him as if he were her father. His heart was filled with joy to think that Esther had been chosen to be queen, for he hoped that some day she might be able to help her poor people, and speak a good word for them to the king.

But before that time came he and Esther between them were able to do the king himself a great service, and this was how it happened. Mordecai, who held an important post in the court, spent a good deal of his time in what was called the king's gate, a beautiful hall outside the palace, where men waited to have an audience with the king.

It was while waiting there one day that he discovered that a plot was on foot to kill the king, and he immediately sent secretly and told Esther. She, of course, took the news to

the king; and it was all so quickly done that the plotters were seized at once and put to death, and the king's life was saved. No one thought of rewarding Mordecai, and it was all soon forgotten. But the account was written down in the king's book just as it happened.

Soon after this trouble began to gather round Mordecai. The king had put a man called Haman at the head of all the princes of the palace, to be obeyed as if he were the king himself. All the servants and officers of the court bowed before him as he swept proudly through the waiting throng at the king's gate—all except one old man, the Jew Mordecai.

It was not pride which made Mordecai refuse to bow his head to Haman. It was quite a different reason. To bow to a heathen ruler was considered just the same as bowing to the god whom he represented; and Mordecai, who loved and obeyed the true God, would do no reverence to any other. He knew it was dangerous to refuse; but, like Daniel, he was not afraid to show that he served God. People whispered as they watched him, and the whispers grew louder and louder, until they reached the ears of Haman and made him furiously angry.

Day by day the same thing happened, and as Haman saw that upright figure and unbowed head, he hated Mordecai more and more. What was the use of all his state and power as long as that unbending figure stood in his way?

So Haman thought, and he planned a terrible vengeance. The punishment should fall not only on Mordecai, but upon all his people too. The Jews in every part of the country should be swept out of existence. It would be necessary, of course, to work with great cunning; but, after all, the selfish king was easily managed.

"These strange people, the Jews, who are scattered about all thy kingdom, are always giving trouble," he said to Ahasuerus one day. "They have different laws, and refuse to keep the king's law. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed."

Then he went on to offer to pay a large sum of money if he were allowed to carry out the plan. But the king needed no bribe—he was more than willing to grant such a request; and he at once gave his signet ring to Haman, that he might seal the letters that ordered all Jews to be killed.

With a joyful heart Haman set to work at once to write out the letters and fix the day of the massacre, and messengers were sent out to carry the orders into every land.

It was a terrible vengeance, and Mordecai was troubled beyond words. There was but one thing to do: Esther must be told, and she must try to save her people. She must not think of herself. God had given her power, and the time had come when she must use it for His people.

It was no easy thing for Esther to do. No one dared to go in and speak to the king without special permission. Any one who went uninvited might be put to death. It was only if the king should hold out his golden sceptre in token of forgiveness that the intruder would be allowed to live.

But Esther took her courage in both hands. She dressed herself in all her most beautiful, queenly robes and then entered into the royal hall, where the king sat upon his golden throne.

The king looked up with an angry frown to see who it was who dared to come into his presence uninvited; but as soon as his eye fell upon his queen, standing there in all her beauty, with her head humbly bent, his anger died away, and he held out to her his golden sceptre.

No wonder that the king's heart softened as he looked at Esther. She was always beautiful, but to-day there was something almost dazzling about her loveliness, the beauty of her soul shining through the earthly beauty; and as she came forward to touch the sceptre held out towards her, the king was ready to do anything that she asked.

"What wilt thou, Queen Esther?" he said, "and what is thy request? It shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom."

But Esther did not tell him at once what she wanted. Perhaps she thought it wiser to wait. Instead, she only asked that the king and Haman should come to a feast she had prepared for them.

The feast put the king in a better temper than ever, and again he asked her what it was that she wanted. But once more Esther hesitated, and merely asked that he would be her guest again next day.

Meanwhile Haman's heart overflowed with joy and pride, because he had been chosen to sit at the queen's table, and because soon all the hated Jews would be killed, and Mordecai would stand no longer in his path. He could scarcely wait for the day of the massacre to dawn, and he began to make ready a great gallows on which Mordecai should be hanged.

But that very night it so happened that the king was wakeful; and as he could not sleep he ordered that his books should be brought, and the records read aloud to him. And what should be read to him but the story of how Mordecai the Jew had saved the king's life!

The king was quite interested as he listened. "What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?" he asked.

"There is nothing done for him," answered the servants.

"That must be put right at once," said the king; and he immediately sent for Haman, and asked him, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour?"

Now Haman, of course, thought he must be the man whom the king meant, so he suggested the most splendid honours he could think of. The man should be dressed in the

king's own royal robes, he said, and ride upon the king's horse, and the most noble of all the princes should bring him on horseback through the streets of the city.



QUEEN ESTHER

This answer pleased the king. "Make haste," he said, "and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken."

It was a bitter moment for proud Haman, and there was no escape from the bitterness. The king must be obeyed. Only when it was all done, and he had been obliged to act as the servant of the man he hated, he hid himself in his house and gave vent to his furious anger. But even then he was obliged to

quickly hide his feelings, for the king's servants came to tell him that Esther's feast was ready, and he must come at once.

And now the time had come for Esther to risk all. And when the king asked her again to tell him her request, she went and knelt at his feet, and begged for her own life, and for the life of her people.

"Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to threaten thy life?" thundered the king.

Then Esther rose up and pointed to the terrified Haman, who stood trembling before them. Well might he tremble, for the king's wrath was a terrible thing to see; and the order was given that they should hang Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

It was impossible to change the wicked order that Haman had written, for it was sealed with the king's signet. But yet there was another way of granting the queen's request, and the king sent out other letters, ordering that all the Jews should be allowed to arm and defend themselves. And so Queen Esther's people were saved. She had willingly risked her own life, and now she had her reward, for there was joy and gladness amongst all the Jews. Mordecai was given a post of great honour, and was dressed in royal robes of blue and white, covering a garment of fine linen and purple, and he had, too, a golden crown; while Esther, the queen, had all that she could desire, and never forgot to thank God that He had used her to save His people.

CHAPTER XXIV

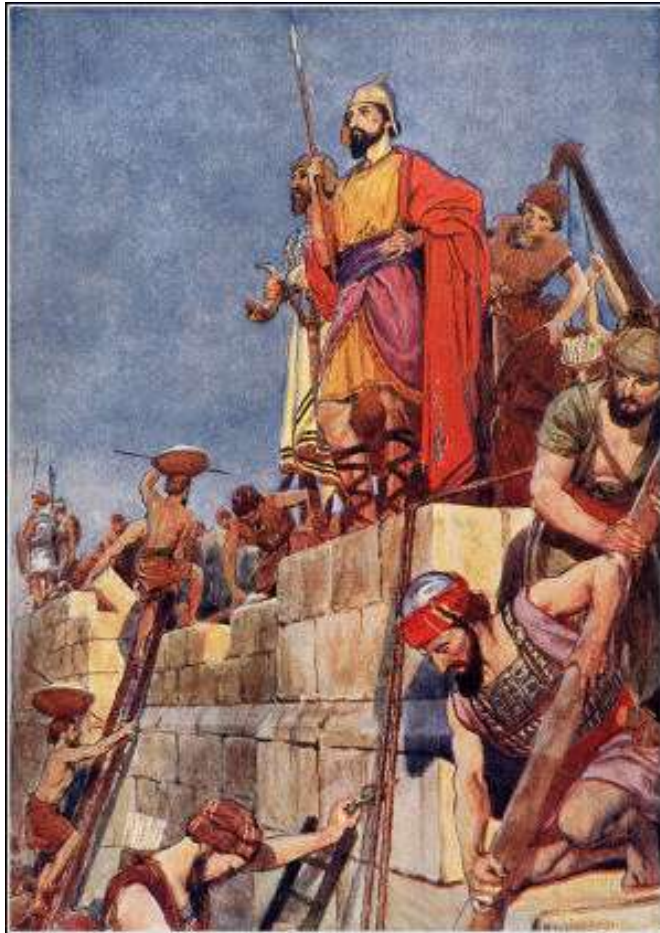
NEHEMIAH, THE WARRIOR BUILDER

It was considered a post of great honour in Babylon, at the palace of Shushan, to be cupbearer to the king, to fill the golden goblet with the king's special wine, and to serve him at the royal table. Not only must the cupbearer be an honourable and trustworthy man, but something else also was required of him—he must always show a cheerful face when on duty, for it was thought to be unlucky if sad looks should meet the king's eye.

Now Nehemiah, one of the captive Jews, was cupbearer to the King of Babylon when this story begins. He was a great favourite at court, and did his service cheerfully, although at times his heart was sad when he thought of his own land, and the ruin of his beloved city, Jerusalem. Very little news ever reached him of that far-away city; but one day a little company of Jews arrived, who brought tidings from Jerusalem, and among them was a near relation of Nehemiah, the king's cupbearer. It was a day of great excitement for all the Jews in the city: news from home was as welcome as water to a parched land. But this news, alas! brought no refreshing joyfulness. It was a sad account which the men gave of their beloved land. Sorrow and want were everywhere. Jerusalem was laid in ruins, the walls broken down, and the gates burned. It stood there defenceless against any enemy that cared to attack it.

As Nehemiah listened to all this he bowed his head and wept. But what was the use of tears ? There was a better thing to do: he would pray to God for help. And as he prayed a splendid plan came into his head. The king, Artaxerxes, was seated upon his golden couch, and the queen sat beside him, in the great hall whose pavement was of red and blue and white marble. White and blue curtains were fastened by purple cords

and silver rings to the marble pillars. From the gardens came the scent of roses and the breath of orange blossoms. Everything was beautiful and pleasing in the king's sight. Only Nehemiah, the king's cupbearer, was at fault. He came forward to present the golden cup, and the king frowned as he looked upon him.



"SO BUILT WE THE WALL."

"Why is thy countenance sad?" he asked at once, for Nehemiah had never looked like that before.

For a moment fear clutched at Nehemiah's heart—it was dangerous to offend the king in the smallest matter; but he answered bravely—"Let the king live for ever," he said. "Why should not my countenance be sad, when Jerusalem, my city, is in ruins, her walls broken down, and her gates burned?"

This was surely the time to speak of his great plan, and in his heart he prayed to God to teach him what words to use, as the king went on to ask him what it was he wanted.

"If it please the king," he said, "that thou wouldest send me unto my own city, that I may build up its walls."

It was a bold thing to ask; but the very boldness of the cupbearer seemed to please the king, and his request was granted. And not only was Nehemiah allowed to go, but he was given letters of safe conduct, and a written order that he should have all the wood he needed from the king's forest for the building which he had planned.

It was a big work for one man to set out to do. But no difficulties daunted Nehemiah: it was work for his country and his God, and that thought strengthened his arm and flled his heart with courage. He had no use for the words "fear" or "failure."

After a long journey across desert and plain, he at last arrived at the ruined city, and found it in even a worse state than he had expected. For three days he rested, and then late at night he secretly and silently slipped out of the city, and went all round its broken-down walls. There, in the dim starlight, he saw the great piles of rubbish lying in dark heaps; the black gaps where no gates stood spoke to him of the desolation of the city; but the sight, instead of discouraging him, only made him keen to begin the work. He had told no one in the city yet what he had come to do; but next day he called all the Jews together, and laid his plans before them.

It is wonderful what one man's enthusiasm can do. All the men who listened to Nehemiah were soon almost as anxious to build up the walls as he was. As they listened to his

words, all their love for their country and pride in their city began to stir in their hearts, and they cried out as with one voice, "Let us rise up and build."

Of course, the enemies who lived amongst them and in the country round about were watching what was going on, and they laughed when they heard of the great plan. What could this little handful of weak people do?

But they forgot that behind their weak hands was the strong arm of God, and the stout heart of his servant Nehemiah, who replied to their mocking words the calm assurance, "The God of Heaven, He will prosper us."

And before long their enemies saw that they had mocked too soon. Day by day the walls grew higher and higher. Nehemiah's plan worked well. Everybody was given his own special part to build, and worked with all his might. Even the women helped. The daughters of one of the rulers of the city were toiling there. Then, as now, the women knew that to serve their country was a better thing than to live in dainty ease—that toil-worn, roughened hands were a badge of honour in the great service.

The mocking enemies who watched the work began to be uneasy. The city would soon be a stronghold if this went on. Some plot must be laid to stop the work, some cunning plan of attack thought out to make it a failure.

But they little knew Nehemiah. He was just as good a soldier and general as he was a planner and builder, and he knew how to put courage into the hearts of the people. "Be not ye afraid of them," his voice rang out: "remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Then he divided the people into two companies: one half to be regular soldiers, ready to fight whenever the enemy attacked, and the other half to go steadily on with the building, but with weapons ready too. The men who worked only with

one hand held a sword in the other, and those who needed both hands for their work had their swords fastened to their sides.

From the first faint light of dawn to the time when the stars began to come out the people worked, and all night long they watched and waited, ready at the sound of the trumpet call to assemble for the attack and beat back the enemy.

In vain, too, the enemy tried to set a trap for Nehemiah. They pretended to be friendly and to want peace, and they begged him to come and talk things over with them, meaning that he should never return; but he only answered that he was too busy—it was a time for work, not talk. Every plan failed, and always the walls rose higher and higher.

It was not only the city walls which Nehemiah made strong, but the time the work went on he was trying also to make the people stronger and better, and more fit for victory when it should come. He bade the rich people help the poor, instead of grinding them down; he showed all the workers how they might deny themselves for the common good, and how they should give up everything that hindered the work and was displeasing to God.

No wonder with such a leader the day of victory would not be far off. In a wonderfully short time the walls were finished, the gates were put up, and Jerusalem was a strong and fortified city once more.

Then Nehemiah ordered a great feast should be held—a feast of dedication, or the giving of the walls to God. Two processions of joyful people were formed, and as they swept round under the strong walls, and met in the Temple to give thanks to God, a song of praise and great rejoicing went up, which swelled to such a mighty burst of sound, that it echoed far over the land, and was heard outside the city walls.

So Nehemiah proved what it was possible for a man to do when strengthened by the call of duty to serve his country and his God.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MESSENGER OF THE KING

Many long years had gone by since Jeremiah the prophet cried his warnings in the streets of Jerusalem, and every one of those warnings had come true. The Jews were now a conquered people under the rule of the great Roman Empire, and although they were allowed to have a king, he was only a vassal, or servant king. The people felt bitterly the loss of their freedom, and they longed more and more for the great Deliverer whom God had promised to send—the King who was to sit on David's throne and make them once more a free people.

The time was drawing very near now when that promise was to be fulfilled. The coming of the King was close at hand. As in the early morning before sunrise the sky in the east is lit by a slow, soft light, which begins to spread upwards, faintly at first and then glowing into full glory as the sun appears, so there were already signs that the great Dawn was near, that the dark night of sin and sorrow was to fade before the Light of the World. God was sending a messenger to prepare the way of the King, and to tell the people of His coming.

It was at the time when a cruel king called Herod was ruling at Jerusalem that there lived at Hebron an old priest, Zacharias, and his wife Elisabeth. Theirs was a pleasant home on the sunny slopes of the Judean hills. And it was a happy home, too, for both Zacharias and his wife served God and loved Him with all their hearts.

But although the home was a happy one, it was very quiet and rather lonely. No patter of children's feet had ever sounded there; no childish voices had ever broken the quiet. The old priest and his wife had longed to have a child; but the

years passed on and they both grew old, and the hope died away. There was to be no son to bear their name.

Perhaps it was specially lonely for Elisabeth when her husband went to take his turn in the service of the beautiful Temple at Jerusalem; but she had grown accustomed to that. She never looked for any change, but just lived her quiet life day by day. She little thought that something was going to happen soon that would change her whole life. Zacharias had gone up to the Temple to begin his share of the service, as he had so often done before. His part was to enter into the Holy Place where God's altar stood, and to swing the great golden censer before the altar, so that the fragrance of the incense should rise in its sweetness to heaven, together with the prayers of the people who knelt outside. Now, suddenly, in the midst of his prayers, as he swung the golden censer, the old priest looked up, and saw through the blue smoke of the incense that he was not alone. There, on the right side of the altar, stood an angel, a shining messenger from God, a vision so glorious that at first Zacharias was afraid.

But the voice of the angel calmed his fears; and as he listened to the message which God had sent his heart almost stood still with joy.

"Fear not, Zacharias," said the angel: "for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth."

He was to be a very special child, the angel went on to say, and he was to do a very special work, for which he must be carefully trained.

It all seemed so wonderful that Zacharias could scarcely believe it could be true, even as he listened to the angel's words. The doubt in his heart made him long for some sign, that he might be quite sure that God meant to give him a son.

There was no need for a sign. It was Gabriel, the angel who stood in the presence of God, who had brought him the message. That surely should have been sufficient proof that the message was true. But because Zacharias had doubted, the sign was given.

"Thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed," said the angel, "because thou believest not my words."

This was the news which the old priest brought home with him when the time of his service was ended; this was the wonderful happening which was to change the whole life of Elisabeth, the patient, lonely old woman.

The words of the angel Gabriel came true. God kept His promise and sent a little son to gladden the hearts of Zacharias and Elisabeth. But through all the months before the baby was born the old priest was dumb. Not a word could he speak, until the child was eight days old and it was time to give him his name.

"You will, of course, call him Zacharias, after his father," said the rejoicing relations and friends.

But Elisabeth answered quietly, "Not so; but he shall be called John." That was not a family name, objected the relations; they were sure she was making a mistake. They would try, by making signs, to ask the dumb father what name he wanted.

Zacharias understood their signs, and as he could not speak he called for a writing tablet, and when it was brought he wrote clearly the words, "His name is John." Even as he wrote, proving by his words that he believed all the angel had said to him, God took away the punishment which had been sent to him because he had doubted. His speech came back, and he could now talk and thank God in beautiful words as well as silently in his heart.

It was all so strange, that as the people talked together and looked at the baby they asked each other, "What kind of child will this be?" Then God's Holy Spirit filled the heart of the old priest, and taught him the wonderful song which we so often sing in church, beginning, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel: for He hath visited and redeemed His people; "and going on to say, "And thou, child, shall be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways."

In that far-away country in those olden days the roads were often very rough and badly kept, and it was the custom when a king was to pass by that servants were sent a long way ahead, to clear the path and make it as smooth as possible before the king came. They would remove the stones, clear away any branches of trees which might have fallen across the way, and tell all those they met to stand aside and leave the road clear for the coming of the king.

And this was the work which God had set for the little son of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Only it was not just an ordinary road that he was to prepare and keep clear, nor was it for any earthly king that the way was to be made ready. The King was Jesus Christ, the promised Deliverer; the road was the hearts of His people, who were neither ready nor fit to welcome Him.

As the little lad grew up, his father and mother would begin to tell him about the work he was to do; and they trained him carefully, too, as the angel had directed, making him hardy and strong both in mind and body. The King's messenger would need all his strength and courage to prepare that rough and crooked road before the coming of the King.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COMING OF THE KING

It was springtime and the fields of Palestine were all decked with their spring flowers. The silver gray of the olive trees shone above a sea of scarlet anemones, the tender green of the vines was as fair as the flowers themselves. Round about the little village of Nazareth spring had smiled very kindly upon the land, and buds were unfolding on every side to meet her smile. The very name of the little village meant "flowery."

There, in one of the little square houses built of white stone, a maiden was sitting sewing, and she seemed to belong to the spring and the flowers. No slender lily of the field was fairer than she, no white flower was purer than the heart of this village maiden. She was thinking happy thoughts as she sewed alone in her room that glad spring day, but she little knew that it was to be the most wonderful day of her life.

Suddenly, in the midst of her work, she felt she was not alone, and she stopped and looked up. There before her stood an angel, Gabriel, God's messenger, who was looking kindly down upon her. He called her by her name, Mary, and bade her not be afraid. But there was no fear in Mary's heart, she was not even startled. Her thoughts were so often with God that His messenger was welcome at any time.

"Hail, thou that art highly favoured," the angel Gabriel was saying, "the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."

Mary looked up, wondering. She could not understand the meaning of these gracious words, but soon the wonderful truth dawned upon her. The angel told her that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Son of God, the Saviour

and King, whose name was to be called "Jesus," for He would save His people from their sins.

There was no thought of self in Mary's heart. She did not say she was only a poor maiden unfit to be the mother of the King of Heaven. She was ready for God to use her as He would; she was His handmaid ready to fulfil His will.

It was in the happy springtime that the angel brought this message to Mary, but it was in the cold dark days of winter that the angel's promise came true.

Joseph, the village carpenter, Mary's promised husband, knew all about the angel's message, for God had told him too about the coming of the King, and had bidden him be a faithful guardian to his young wife.

Together one cold winter day they journeyed up to the little hill town of Bethlehem, to put their names upon the census roll, as the Roman governor had commanded. All the people had been ordered to go to their native cities to give in their names, and both Joseph and Mary belonged to Bethlehem, the city of David, for they were descendants of the shepherd king.

It had been a long journey, and Mary was tired, although she rode upon the shaggy back of the ass which Joseph so carefully led. It was late, and the winding white road that led to the city gates was almost deserted, for they were the last travellers to come in. Already the twilight was darkening into night, and the stars began to hang out their silver lamps in the deep dark blue overhead.

At last the inn was reached, and Joseph inquired anxiously about a lodging. It was too late; every room was full, they could not possibly be taken in. Every house in the little town was crowded. The only thing to do was to shelter themselves for the night in one of the stable caves, where oxen and asses, camels and mules, were crowded together.

And it was here, in a poor stable, that very night, that Mary's Baby, the King of Heaven, was born. Such a poor welcome it seemed for a King! Only a handful of hay for His bed, only a wooden manger for His cradle, only a few swaddling bands to wrap round His little limbs, only His poor sweet mother to wait on Him, and the breath of the ox and the ass to warm Him.

But although no one in Bethlehem knew that a King had been born that night, although no bells rang out, no grand illumination marked His coming, yet His stars shone down in silent splendour, His angels sang His song of welcome, and Mary's heart was full of joy. She knew that it was God's Son she held in her arms, that the angel's promise had been fulfilled.

Outside the town, on the slopes of the hill, shepherds were watching their flocks, just as the shepherd boy David had done in the same fields long years before; and to them the herald angels sang their song, telling the news of the Baby's birth, while the golden gates of Heaven swung wide and showed the glory within.

Soon the shepherds were kneeling in the little stable, worshipping the King; and as they knelt they told the young mother of all that they had seen out on the hillside, and repeated to her the angels' message "Peace on earth, goodwill to men."

Later on, another company of men knelt to do homage to the Baby King. They were no rough shepherds from the hills this time, but stately men in rich robes who had journeyed from a far-distant land, led by a star to the place where the young Child lay. They brought to Him precious gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and laid them at His feet; but far more precious than any gifts was the worshipping love which both they and the humble shepherds offered to God as they knelt before Mary's son, the King of Heaven.

All these wonderful happenings were treasured up in His mother's heart, and filled her thoughts as she rocked her little son in her arms. Most mothers think a great deal about the name they mean to give their babies, but Mary had no need to think of that. Long ago the angel had told her that He was to be called "Jesus;" and so as soon as it was possible, she carried Him to the great Temple, just as we carry our babies to church, there to give them to God to be His children.



"THEY SAW THE YOUNG CHILD WITH MARY HIS MOTHER."

It was a very common sight in the Temple to see a mother bringing her baby to the priest, while the father carried the lamb or pigeons which it was the rule to offer as a thanksgiving; and there was nothing special to mark the little company from Bethlehem as they entered the Temple, Mary carrying her Baby in her arms, and Joseph holding in his hand the basket in which were two white doves.

But there, in the Temple, two of God's servants, Simeon and Anna, were waiting to see the Baby King. They did not look for any earthly pomp or grandeur, rich robes or royal state. Simeon, the old man, knew that the poor looking woman was indeed a queen, the mother of the Lord, that the Baby she held so lovingly in her arms was the King of Heaven. So he took the child in his arms and thanked God as he called Him a light sent to lighten the whole world and to be the glory of His people Israel.

Surely this was all a happy time for the gentle mother. But there were anxious days in store for her. Herod, the cruel king, had heard of the visit of those Wise Men, and was uneasy in his mind. He knew that God had promised to send a great Deliverer, a King to rule His people; but he thought it would be an earthly king, and he feared that his throne was in danger. The Wise Men had talked of a wonderful new star which had appeared, a star which marked a royal birth, and they had gone to Bethlehem to look for the new-born King. He had bidden them come back and tell him if they found the Child. But day after day passed, and there was no sign of the return of the travellers. God had warned them that Herod was planning mischief against the Baby King, and so they had gone quietly home another way.

Full of anger, King Herod realized that he had been mocked by those wise travellers, and he determined to carry through a cruel plan. He sent his soldiers to the peaceful little town and ordered them to kill every baby in Bethlehem. In that way the Baby King could not possibly escape, he thought.

But long before the soldiers appeared, God warned Joseph, the faithful guardian, that he must take the Baby and His mother and steal secretly away from the threatened danger. And Joseph did not lose a moment. He saddled the ass, and placed Marv and the Baby carefully on its back, and then started out by night down the winding road which led to safety. The fear of the cruel king might drive them far from home, but the Baby lay soft and warm in His mother's arms, where no evil could touch Him.

All His life angels were very close to Him. It was an angel who had brought God's message to His mother that glad spring day. Angels had sung His welcome on the Bethlehem hills. It was an angel who had warned Joseph to flee away before Herod's cruel soldiers could arrive. So, surely, in that night journey and all the dangers that awaited them, angels must have hovered very close around the travellers and held the Child and His gentle mother safe in the shelter of their shining wings.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BOYHOOD OF THE KING

The little family from Bethlehem had only been in far-away Egypt for a year when news came that the cruel King Herod was dead, and God's word came once again to Joseph, telling him it was now safe to take the young Child and Mary His mother back to their native land. But before they reached Bethlehem they heard that Herod's son was now king, and that he was as cruel as his father had been; so they were afraid to go on, and instead they turned aside from the road and went by the winding path that led through the valley to Nazareth. There, in the quiet little village among the flowery fields, they made their home again, and Joseph once more took up his trade of village carpenter.

The Baby Jesus was but a little child when they first came to Nazareth, but He soon grew into a strong, tall boy. Only His sweet mother could have told us stories of His wonderful baby days, but all these precious stories she kept in her heart. We only know that Jesus grew "in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man," that He must have been the happiest child that ever lived because He never did anything wrong, but was kind and unselfish and full of love, first for His mother and then for every one else. He loved all God's creatures too, and the flowers and the birds. Afterwards when He became a man, and was teaching the people, He often spoke of the many things He had learnt to love as a child in the little village of Nazareth-the coloured flowers that made the fields so beautiful in spring, and the common brown sparrows which were of so little value, but which were in His Father's care.

So the years passed, until the Boy Jesus grew to be twelve years old, which was the age when Jewish boys were

allowed to go with their parents for the first time to worship at the beautiful Temple at Jerusalem.

It was in the month of April that the great festival called the Passover was held, and great crowds of people wended their way along the roads that led to Jerusalem from all the villages and towns round about. It was pleasant to travel along the winding road down the valley, through the flowery fields of Nazareth, to rest under the cool green shade of the trees during the mid-day heat, to pitch white tents at night, and rest until the sun rose next day and the journey once more began. It was a wonderful journey for the Boy Jesus; and when, on the fourth day, they came in sight of Jerusalem, the great city, and saw the sun shining on the golden roof of the beautiful Temple and on the dazzling white marble of its pillars, it must have filled His heart with a great happiness. He knew all about the history of that holy city, and that the great Temple was His Father's house, but there were many other things He longed to know, many questions He wanted to ask.

All through the days of the festival the Boy Jesus was to be found in the wonderful Temple. But it was not the call of the silver trumpets, the sight of the hundreds of white-robed priests, the beauty of all the exquisite coloured marbles, or the glory of the golden treasures that drew Him there. He wanted to listen to the great teachers who taught in the Temple; He wanted to ask them questions, and to learn all that He could about His Father's house.

So, when the festival had come to an end and the people had started on their homeward journey again, Mary found that her son was missing. They had gone on for a whole day, thinking He was with the other boys, but at night discovered that He was not there at all, but must have been left behind.

Sorely troubled and in great distress Mary and Joseph turned back at once, and for three nights and days they never rested while they searched for Him. They looked through all the tents pitched outside the city, they searched through all the

city itself, but in vain. At last, on the third day, they went to that part of the Temple where the great teachers were assembled together, and there in their midst they found Jesus, who sat listening, and asking questions.



"THEY FOUND HIM IN THE TEMPLE, SITTING IN THE MIDST OF THE DOCTORS."

The poor tired mother's heart was sore with grief and anxiety. Never before had her son caused her any pain or

trouble, and now, as she stretched out her hands to Him, she cried out the reproachful question—

"Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing."

Ah! but she was forgetting that He was not only her son but the Son of God, that before everything else He owed obedience to His Father, and must prepare for the work He had been sent to do. Surely she should have known that, and should not have been so troubled and afraid.

"How is it that ye sought me?" said Jesus, wonderingly. "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

He did not mean to hurt His gentle mother, but she must understand that God's work came before everything else. It was necessary to tell her that. But afterwards He rose obediently to go with her, leaving those learned men to wonder who this Boy could be who had asked such deep questions and showed such wonderful wisdom.

It was not time yet to begin the great work, and Jesus was ready to go back cheerfully and obediently to the little home at Nazareth, to work with Joseph in the carpenter's shop, and help His mother in the house. But all the time, day by day, He was learning to prepare Himself to be ready for the time when His work should begin.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

All this time, while the Boy Jesus was living His quiet life in the little village of Nazareth, learning to prepare Himself for His Father's work, another boy, only a few months older, was also being trained to help in that work.

This boy was John, the son of the old priest Zacharias, of whom the angel had said that he should be the messenger sent before the King to prepare His way before Him.

It was not an easy life that John led. He had no fine clothes or soft bed or dainty food. Elisabeth, his mother, must have found it hard, too, not to give her only son all the pleasures and treats which boys so much enjoy. But she never thought of pleasing herself. She knew that the boy must be trained to endure hardness, to make him a fit messenger of the King, and she taught him from the very beginning the two great lessons of obedience and self-denial.

As soon as he was old enough he left the comfortable, happy home at Hebron, and far away out in the wilderness he lived his hard life alone, without friends or companions. Robbers there were in those wild, lonely places, but there was nothing they could rob him of. Wild beasts prowled about at nights, but he was brave and fearless, and under the light of the stars he slept as peacefully as if he had been at home. His dress was a rough garment, made of camel's hair, with a leather girdle round his waist, and his food was what the poorest beggars ate—locusts and the honey which the wild bees stored away in the rocks.

But in the loneliness of that hard life the King's messenger learned many things. God seemed very near in the quiet wilderness. God's voice sounded clearly when no other voice was in his ear. Night and day he thought only of the work that lay before him, until his whole heart was filled with

the great desire to make the road ready for the King's feet. He knew how full of sin were the hearts of the people to whom the King was coming. He knew how much must be done before that road could be made a royal highway.

It was on the banks of the river Jordan that he began his work. There he stood and preached to the people, a wild, strange figure in his camel's hair coat, and leathern girdle. His face was weather-beaten and sun burnt, his hair was untrimmed, and he wore rough sandals upon his bare feet. His appearance certainly would not draw any one to listen to him. But as soon as he began to speak the people were held spellbound, and crowds gathered round him. The news of this wonderful preacher who spoke such burning words spread from town to town and from village to village, and the people flocked out to the wilderness to hear him.

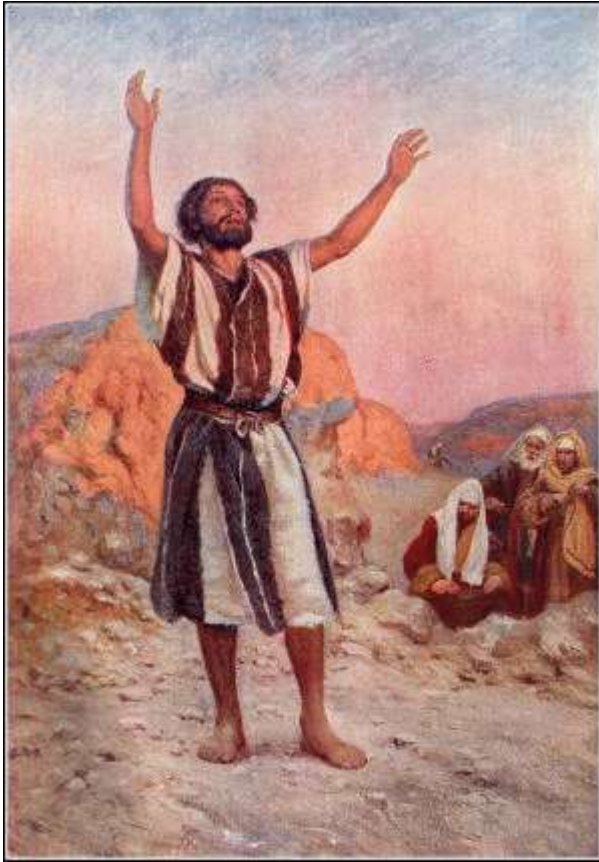
It seemed a strange message that this wild-looking messenger preached. The King was coming, he told them, the King for whom they had waited so long; but they were not fit to welcome Him.

He did not only, say your hearts are evil and you are wicked; he told them exactly what the sins were that were making their hearts so black and unworthy of the King's approach.

There were greedy people who had all they wanted, and never shared what they had with other people. These, he said, must give of their good things to the poor, who had nothing. He told the rough soldiers that they must not be cruel, nor must they take away things by force from defenceless people. Rich and poor alike, he told them plainly what were the many bad things they were doing, and how they must put an end to them before the King came.

There he stood, a lonely man in the midst of a great crowd, one voice on the side of God sounding in the ears of men who were more accustomed to the voice of the Evil One. But he was never afraid. He never thought of himself at all,

only of the coming King, and with all his greatness and power he was as humble as a little child.



"THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS."

The people who listened to him began at last to think he was a very great prophet—perhaps even the King Himself; and one day they came and asked him plainly if this was so, if he was indeed the Christ.

"No," answered St. John at once. "I am nothing. I am but the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord." He was but the servant going before; the

King was near at hand, whose shoes he was not even worthy to stoop down and unloose.

Now, as St. John preached to the people and told them how bad they were, some of them were very sad at heart, and wanted to live better lives; and then St. John baptized them in the river, to show that they were really sorry. Just as unclean things can be washed in water and made clean again, so it was a sign to show that they wanted their black hearts to be made white.

But one day, as St. John was baptizing, he looked up, and saw the King there, standing among the crowd.

No one knew that this was the King. He had no royal robes, no crown on His head. His hands were roughened with work, and He wore the dress of an ordinary poor peasant. Even St. John himself did not know Him, though something told him that he was in the presence of One mightier and holier than himself. So, when the King drew near and asked to be baptized among the rest, he was not willing to baptize Him at first. "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" he said. He would rather have knelt humbly at His feet. But Jesus wished to set a good example to others; and as the King had made known His will the servant could but obey.

Then it was that St. John, who had not recognized his Lord before, knew indeed that the King was there, for the gates of Heaven were opened wide, and God's Holy Spirit like a dove came down and rested upon Him, while God's voice sounded through the blue, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Others besides St. John heard that voice, and, hearing it, left their teacher to follow the great Master. There was never a thought of self in the humble heart of God's messenger, and he was glad that people should leave him to follow the King. "He must increase, but I must decrease," he said. "He must grow greater and greater, while I grow less."

It was quite true. In a few months the messenger's voice was no longer heard on the banks of the Jordan. St. John no longer breathed the free air of the desert. Shut up in a dark dungeon, he waited the pleasure of King Herod Antipas, whose soldiers had seized him and dragged him to the Black Castle which overlooked the sad waters of the Dead Sea.

St. John feared no man. He had not hesitated to tell even a king that he was doing wrong, and so King Herod had determined to silence his accusing voice.

For one long year St. John lived in that dismal dungeon, and when at last the door was opened, it was a door through which he passed into the presence of God.

Suddenly one night, when a gay birthday feast was going on in the palace, a soldier entered the dungeon, carrying in his hands a sword and a golden dish. With one blow the prisoner's head was cut off, and borne away to the banqueting hall.

It was an easy matter to kill the body, but no one could kill the soul of the King's messenger. They could only set it free like a bird from a snare. The servant's work was ended. The voice that had cried aloud to prepare the way of the Lord was silent now, but his words could never die.

Beheaded in a dark dungeon, lonely and friendless, the words spoken by the angel Gabriel before his birth, "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord," had indeed come true.

And the King, the Lord whom St. John served, said of His faithful servant these golden words: "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WORK OF THE KING

At last the time came when Jesus must leave the little quiet Nazareth village, and begin His Father's work. There were so many poor people in the dark world waiting for the Light, so much suffering and pain and sin waiting for the healing touch of His hand and His gracious word of forgiveness.

But although He was God, the Light of the world, who could forgive sins, yet He was Man too, and He never saved Himself from any of our hardships and temptations. The devil tempted Him just as he tempts each one of us now; and He often suffered hunger and pain, and many a night He had no place in which to shelter, or pillow on which to lay His head.

The story of His wonderful work has often been told—how He opened the eyes of poor blind men, healed the sick, fed the hungry, comforted the sorrowful, brought back life to the dead, and, more than all, taught people to know that God was their Father, and loved each one of them. But among all the stories of this wonderful life, children always love to remember the special times when Jesus had time to think of them, and to speak to them as well as to the grown-up people, and how the children of long ago showed their love for Him as well.

It was one day when Jesus was passing a little village that He sat down to rest for a while under the cool shade of a wayside tree. He was very weary, and His disciples and friends who were with Him were anxious that He should rest quietly, and that no one should disturb Him. But the village people had heard that the great Teacher was there, and the joyful news quickly spread from house to house. The women hastily called the children together from their play. The little

ones who could not walk they carried in their arms; even the tiniest babies were not left behind. These mothers knew how good and kind and wonderful this great Teacher was. They had heard how the very touch of His hand healed the sick and gave sight to the blind, and they wanted Him to lay those loving hands upon their children's heads, for they knew that His touch would bring a blessing.

Very soon a crowd had gathered, and began to move towards the place where Jesus was. The barefooted children in their scanty little garments pattered along the dusty road; the women in their coarse red and blue robes, with bright handkerchiefs over their heads, followed behind, carrying the babies in their arms. All hurried towards the place where that tired figure could be seen resting at the wayside.

The disciples of the Master frowned as they saw the approaching crowd. This was too bad. If there were sick people to be healed or anxious men who wanted to hear the Master's wise words, it would have been more easily excused. But to disturb Him for nothing more than a crowd of children and babies was more than they could bear. The women should have known better than to allow their children to come there and trouble the Master.

So the disciples hurried forward to check the little crowd and bring it to a standstill before it could disturb that quiet figure. The children were to go home at once, they said, and the mothers should be ashamed of themselves for being so selfish and thoughtless.

All the happy smiles began to fade upon the children's faces, and the mothers hung their heads with downcast looks when they heard the rebuking words. Slowly they turned to go back again without the blessing they had longed for. But in a moment their disappointment was turned into joy, for the Master, looking on, called to them Himself, and the sound of His dear voice could be heard by all.

"Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not," He said, "for of such is the kingdom of God."

He was displeased with His disciples for trying to send the little ones away. He wanted them, every one.

The children were not shy. They knew at once that it was the voice of some one who loved them, and they pressed happily forward as near to Him as possible, resting their little sunbrowned hands confidently on His knee, or clutching at a fold of His robe. The mothers, too, came near, and humbly asked if He would lay His hand in blessing on their babies' heads. Each little dark or sunny head felt the touch of that gentle hand as the children gathered round His knees. And not only that, but He took the tiny babies in His own arms, just as the good shepherd carries his lambs.

It was when His life on earth was nearly ended, that once more a crowd of children gathered round the Master. But this time they did not come to ask anything of Him, but to give Him all they had to offer their song of praise and worship.

The day before, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem amidst the welcoming shouts of the people. The men and women who went out to meet Him treated Him as if He were indeed a king. There was no procession of horsemen and chariots, no banners flying or trumpets blown, no royal robes or jewelled crown. The King, clothed in His peasant robes, rode upon a humble ass, and there seemed nothing to show that He was a great conqueror. But that day the people hailed Him as their earthly king. They took off their garments, and laid them on the road as a carpet for Him to ride over; they cut down palms and silvery olive branches, and strewed them in His way. The air rang with the sound of their voices as they shouted, "Hosanna: Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest."

The children amongst the crowd listened to that shout of praise, and it rang in their ears until they too joined in the song. And later on, when the King entered the Temple, they

gathered round Him, a little group of children, and sang out again with all their hearts the hymn they had learned: "Hosanna: Hosanna in the highest."



"SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME."

The frowning, white-robed priests were very angry as they listened. They were really more angry with Jesus than with the children, for they hated Him, and it made them furious to hear the people call Him a King. They dared not say what was in their hearts to Him, but it was safer to blame the children who were making so much noise in the Holy Temple with their hymn of praise.

"Hearest Thou what these say?" demanded one of the chief priests of Jesus, with an impatient gesture of his hands towards the singing children.

But Jesus loved to hear those childish voices. It made Him happy to receive their praise and love, and He would not bid them be silent. It was perfect praise, He told the priest who wished to have them silenced.

With the same kind look in His eyes as when He took those village babies in His arms, He listened now to the voices of the city children, ready always, then as now, to receive their love and worship.

CHAPTER XXX

PARABLES, OR STORIES

Every one loves stories, and Jesus, as He taught the people, knew this. So He often wrapped up some special lesson in the form of a story, and hid the beautiful truth deep in its heart. Only those who looked carefully and listened with their hearts as well as their ears, found the hidden meaning of these stories, or parables, as they are called.

It was not the learned and the rich who crowded round most eagerly to listen to the Master's stories. It was to the poor, weary, toilworn people that Jesus loved to speak His comforting words. Many of these people were not at all good; but that was just the reason why they wanted help, and needed to be taught to try and live a whiter, purer life.

It was once when He was among a crowd of these poor, sinful people, who were listening with eager, wistful faces to His words of kindness and hope, that He told the story of the Prodigal Son.

"There was once a father who had two sons," the story began. The elder was hard-working, steady, and obedient, one who never gave his father any trouble, but always did his duty. But the younger was a headstrong, difficult boy, idle and self-willed, fond of pleasure, and determined to have his own way. He did not want to work and earn his own living; he thought he had a perfect right to the money which belonged to his father.

"Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me," he said one day. He could not even wait until at his father's death he would receive his share. No, he wanted it now, and he did not stop to think how such a request must hurt his kind father.

The father knew that it was no use telling him how foolish and wrong he was. The headstrong, selfish boy must learn that lesson another way. So he quietly divided all his money, and gave the younger son his share.

There was nothing now to keep the boy at home. His home and his father meant nothing to him compared to pleasure and adventure. So he set off on a long journey to a far-away country, carrying his money with him.

At first everything was as delightful as he could wish. He had nothing to do from morning till night but to plan how he could best enjoy himself. The companions who gathered round him were ready to flatter him and help him spend his money. The flowery path of pleasure was very pleasant to tread.

But by-and-by everything changed. The gay banquets, the riot of delights, came to an end. All his money was spent. All his friends, as they had called themselves, left him. They had no longer any use for him when he had nothing more to give them.

There he was, all alone, a stranger in a strange land. And how was he to live? He had never learned to do skilled work, and it was not easy to begin to earn his living now. There was a great famine, too, in the land, and food was very scarce. Day by day things grew darker and darker. And at last he was so hungry and so poor that he was thankful to hire himself out as a swineherd, and go into the fields to feed pigs. The wages for that kind of work were very small, not nearly enough to buy him his daily bread; and often as he watched the pigs grubbing amongst their food, he was hungry enough to envy them, and to wish he could have a share of the husks upon which they fed.

Thoughts of home now began to haunt him. How kind and patient his father had been. What a comfortable, happy place home seemed. Looking back upon it now. The very

servants there were better fed, and not so hard-worked as he was.



THE PRODIGAL'S AWAKENING

And then suddenly one day, when these thoughts were crowding in upon him, he saw quite clearly, as if by a sudden flash of light, how wrong and foolish he had been from the very beginning. Out there in the fields, while the pigs grunted and fed around him, and there was no one to listen to him, he cried out loud the new thought that had come into his mind: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

It was not an easy thing to go humbly back, to say he had been wrong and ask for forgiveness, but it was the only way. And day by day the longing to see his father, and to tell him how sorry he was, grew stronger and stronger. He was

ready to suffer any punishment, if only he might live at home again.

It was a long journey, but at last the poor, hungry, ragged boy came within sight of home. It was time now to take his courage in both hands, and go to meet his father.

But while he was still a long way off his father saw him. Perhaps he had been watching for that return, feeling sure that some day his boy would come back. He did not wait now for him to come humbly to the door. His heart was so full of pity and love that he ran out to meet him, and before the boy could say a word his father's arms were round him, and he felt his father's kiss of forgiveness and welcome.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son," the words came from the boy's trembling lips. He was more ashamed now than ever. But the father did not even talk of forgiveness; that was too well understood.

"Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him," he commanded the servants; "and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

So there was feasting and rejoicing, and only the elder brother was vexed and angry. He did not like to see his wasteful, undutiful brother welcomed back into the home; he thought he deserved to be punished, and that the reward should have been given to the one who had stayed at home and done his duty.

Looking round upon the listening faces, Jesus, as He finished the story, saw many of His Father's poor, sinful children, who had been just as wicked and foolish as that younger son. He longed for them to know that their Father in Heaven was as pitiful and ready to forgive them as was the father in the story, even though the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees would have them punished as they deserved.

Those clever lawyers and priests who so carefully kept the law needed their lesson too, and it was to one of these that He told the story of the Good Samaritan, that they might learn the lesson of love to their neighbour.

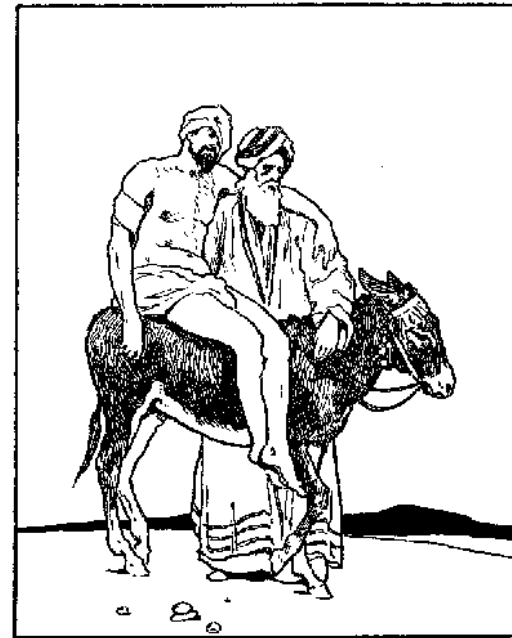
There was a man one day, the story began, who set out to travel along the road which led from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was a wild road, where robbers often lurked, ready to swoop down on any unsuspecting traveller if he happened to be alone and unarmed.

This man was going along the road, never dreaming of danger, when suddenly the robbers sprang out from behind the rocks and fell upon him. They took away from him everything he possessed, even his clothes, and hurt him so sorely that, when they went off and left him by the roadside, he was half dead.

Presently there came along the road one of the priests from the beautiful Temple, and he saw the poor wounded traveller lying there. But it was none of his business, he thought; he did not know the man or care about him. So he carefully drew aside, and passed by on the opposite side of the road. Then another man came along, one who also called himself a servant of God. He went close to the poor traveller and looked at him thoughtfully, but did not touch him or put out a hand to help him. It was not his duty to attend to wounded travellers, and no one could expect him to do more than his duty, and so he passed on.

The poor man would certainly have been left there to die if another traveller had not found him later on. This traveller was not a Jew, but a Samaritan and quite a stranger. He was not specially learned or anxious to do his duty. He never thought of duty as he looked at the poor stripped and wounded figure so sorely in need of help. Very gently he raised the traveller's head and bound up his gaping wounds; and then, lifting him upon the ass, he led him carefully along that dangerous road until an inn was reached. There the poor man was carefully tended; and as all his money had been

stolen, the good, kind stranger paid the innkeeper himself before he left.



THE GOOD SAMARITAN

"Now," said Jesus to the learned man who had listened to the story, "which of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? "

"He that showed mercy on him," came the answer at once. The lawyer was quick to see the lesson Jesus would teach, but that was no use unless he learnt to practise the mercy He spoke of.

And so, "Go and do thou likewise," was the warning that fell from the Master's lips, as the story ended.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TRIUMPH OF THE KING

It seemed at the end as if the King's life had been a failure. Where was His throne? Where was His crown?

Cruel men had seized Him and dragged Him before the judge. The people who had once cried, "Hosanna to the King of Israel!" now shouted, "Crucify Him! crucify Him!" His only crown was a wreath of thorns which the mocking soldiers placed upon His head. His throne was a wooden cross to which they nailed Him, driving the nails through those kind hands which had brought comfort and healing and blessing to so many, and through the tired feet which had trod so faithfully the path of suffering.

To His friends, even perhaps to His dear mother, everything looked black and full of despair. All their hopes were as dead as the quiet body which they laid in the tomb of the silent garden.

That was upon Good Friday; but Easter morning was close at hand.

Very early on the third day, before there was any sign of light, while the stars still looked down on the quiet, sleeping world, a strange thing happened to the soldiers who were keeping guard over the tomb. The wicked men who had put the King to death had been afraid that His friends might steal His body and pretend He was alive, so they had set these soldiers there to watch. All had been quiet until the early morning, and then suddenly the earth shook, and the terrified soldiers saw that Heaven's gates had opened and an angel had come down and rolled away the stone which guarded the opening of the tomb. They were too frightened to stay there any longer, and they fled away from the garden and back to the city.

Though it was so early and still dark, a little company of women were on their way to the silent garden that Easter morning. There was a scent of flowers in the soft air, and as the light dawned in the east the birds began to wake and sing their morning songs. Spring had come. The trees which had looked so gray and dead were bursting into tender green leaves, and seeds which had lain buried in the earth were pushing up living shoots and tiny buds. But the women did not notice flowers or birds or budding trees. It was a dead world to them, because He, their King, was dead, and their own hearts, too, seemed dead with grief.

They reached the garden, and came to the tomb cut out of the rock. Surely some one had been there before them. In the dim light it seemed as if the stone had been rolled away. Trembling and frightened, they went closer, and, stooping down, looked into the tomb. It was empty. The body of the King was not there.

Could some one have stolen that precious body? The women looked at one another in bewildered terror. What should they do? One of them, Mary Magdalene, started at once to go back and tell His disciples; but the others waited there, too full of grief to do anything but just stand and gaze at the empty tomb. Presently they looked carefully in again to make sure; and suddenly, to their amazement, they saw the tomb was empty no longer. An angel sat there, clothed in shining white robes, whose face shone with a heavenly light.

"Be not afraid," they heard him say, as they knelt before him in their terror. "Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: He is risen He is not here."

God's angels had carried many a message of joy from Heaven to earth, but never a more joyful one than this. The King was alive. He had conquered death, and was alive for evermore. It was the Resurrection morning, and just as spring was waking into life those seeds which had been buried under ground, so the bodies which slept in their graves would one

day rise again through the power of the King of Heaven, who had Himself risen from the dead.



"HE IS NOT HERE: FOR HE IS RISEN."

Presently two of the Master's disciples came hurrying into the garden, followed by the woman who had gone to call them. They saw the empty tomb and heard about the shining angel, and they were bewildered, and scarcely knew what to believe. They should have remembered how Jesus had told, them He would rise again; but it seemed too good to be true.

It was the poor, sorrowful woman, Mary Magdalene, who first saw the risen King. She was kneeling by the empty tomb and weeping bitterly, for she had not seen the angel, and

she still thought some one had stolen His body away. Then through her tears she saw a man standing near her, whom she took to be the gardener, and she begged Him to tell her if He knew where the body of Jesus was. Her eyes were so dim with weeping that she could not see clearly, but her ears could never mistake her Lord's voice, the voice that now called her by name, "Mary."

It was the King Himself who stood there: her Lord and Master at whose feet she knelt. One by one He showed Himself to His friends and followers, sometimes when they were in little groups of two or three, sometimes when there were many of them gathered together. Each one of them saw and believed, and the one who still doubted was shown in His Master's hands and feet the print of the cruel nails, and the mark of the sword- thrust in His side. There was no room for doubt. It was indeed Jesus, their Lord and Master.

For some little time yet the King remained on earth to help and teach His followers, and to show them that He was indeed alive. Summer had now come, the fields of golden grain were almost ready for the harvest sickle, and the time drew near when God's Son must return to His Father's kingdom once more.

On the grassy hill top of Mount Olivet the disciples were gathered together with Jesus in their midst; and as He blessed them He was parted from them, and ascended into Heaven, leaving them gazing upwards as a cloud hid Him from their sight.

Once more they were left alone, once more their King was taken from them, but this time it was no hopeless parting. At the side of the little group of men who still stood gazing upwards two angels now appeared, who told them that they ought not to be sorrowful, but, rather, full of triumphant joy. The King was only parted from them for a time. They would see Him again, for He would return in glory, even as they had seen Him ascend into Heaven, a King for evermore.

CHAPTER XXXII

ST. PETER AND THE ANGEL

St. Peter, the servant of Christ, lay in prison awaiting his execution, ready and willing to lay down his life in the cause of his King.

Many years had passed since that long ago day, when his brother had come to him and eagerly told him, "We have found the Christ," and he had first looked upon the beloved face of his Lord and Master. He had been a bold, active, young fisherman then, proud of his strength and his courage, and when the Master had called him to leave his nets and his boat, and to be instead "a fisher of men," he had thrown himself into the new work with all the energy and keenness he possessed.

Then came that dark, bitter time when the King had looked for courage in His bold follower, and had found cowardice—when St. Peter had deserted and denied his Lord. Could he ever forget how he had boastfully declared, "I will lay down my life for Thy sake," and how the sorrowful answer had come, "Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, the cock shall not crow till thou hast denied me thrice."

He had wept very bitterly when those words had come true, and the crowing of the cock had reminded him that he was a traitor and a coward. But no tears could wash away the remembrance of his Master's face when for a moment He turned and looked upon His cowardly servant.

All his pride then had been crushed and humbled, all his courage lost; but one true thing remained—his love for his Master. It was this love that had helped to make him once more a trusted friend and follower of the King. After that Resurrection morning his Lord had come to him, and had three

times asked him the question which was to wipe out all traces of his three denials.

"Lovest thou me?" asked Jesus.

"Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee," cried St. Peter. And then came the command, "Feed my sheep." Ever since that day St. Peter had striven to do his Master's bidding. There had been no signs of cowardice now. He was the boldest of the followers of the King; and so it was that, when a great persecution of the Christians was begun, he was one of the first to be seized and flung into prison, with a special company of soldiers to guard him.

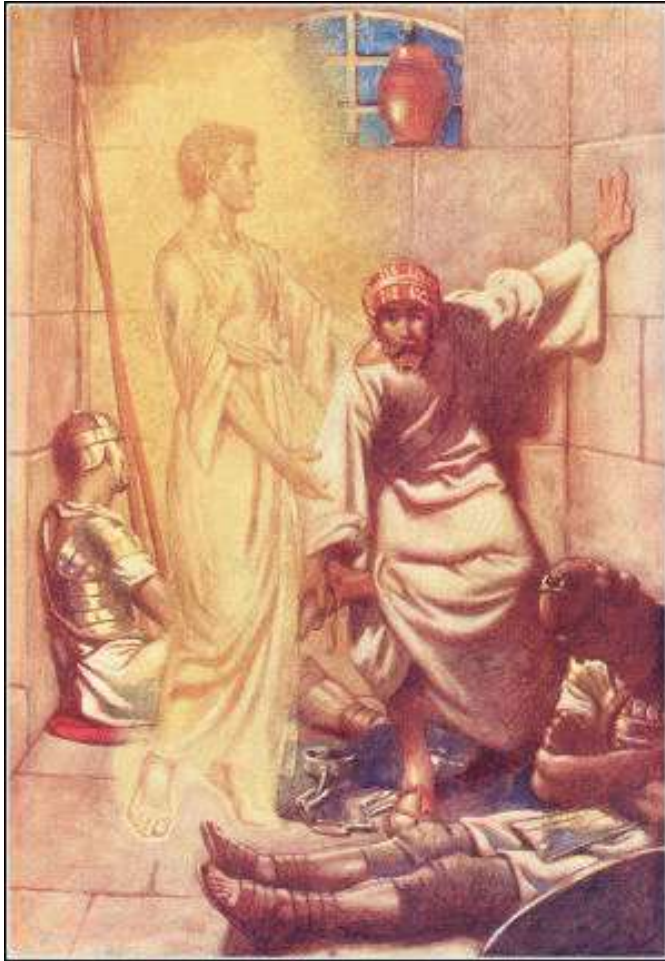
It was springtime, and soon all the earth would be decked with flowers, and new life would be waking everywhere. It was the time when, many years ago now, his Lord had risen, and made Easter day a day of triumph.

Now it had been decided that when Easter dawned the people should enjoy the pleasure of seeing one of the King's followers put to death, and St. Peter waited quietly in his dungeon for the morning to break.

All the Christians in their houses and secret meeting-places were praying for him. He was sure of this, and the thought comforted him; so he settled himself to sleep peacefully between his soldier guards, to whom he was bound by two strong chains. Outside in the starlight more soldiers were keeping watch, but in the prison all was dark.

Then, all of a sudden, the darkness vanished, and a light shone clear and bright. It was neither starlight nor the glow of dawn, but an angel stood there in shining robes, and the dungeon was filled with a glorious radiance.

"Arise up quickly," sounded a voice in St. Peter's ear, as the angel bent over him and roused him from his sleep. St. Peter struggled to obey, forgetting his chains; but as the strong hand of the angel helped him to rise, the chains slipped from his hands and left him free.



"BEHOLD, THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CAME UPON HIM, AND A LIGHT SHINED IN THE PRISON."

Again the angel spoke, and bade him clothe himself and put his sandals upon his feet and wind his cloak around him. All this St. Peter did without questioning. He was sure all this was only a dream or a vision. Presently he would awake, to find himself chained as usual to the sleeping guards.

But again the voice sounded, "Follow me," and St. Peter followed the shining messenger through the prison door and past the soldiers who kept guard outside. Every door silently opened to let them pass. Not a soldier challenged them; and when at last they came to the iron gate which led into the city, that too swung back to let them through. Into the city streets they went—streets which St. Peter knew well—and suddenly he found himself alone, with no guiding light and no angel companion.

It was not a dream. The cool night air blew upon his cheek, the stars were quietly shining overhead, and he knew every house of the street in which he stood. Then the truth flashed upon him. God had sent His angel to deliver him, and he was free. The people were baulked of their prey, and the Easter dawn would bring him life, not death. There had been no sleep for St. Peter's friends that night. In a house close by they were still praying and watching for the dawn, when a knock sounded at the door of the gate, and a young maid, called Rhoda, went hastily to see who was there. In those terrible times a knock might mean some fresh terror. The maid would not open the door until she knew who it was who knocked, and she listened intently to the voice which answered her from without.

It was a voice she knew, she was quite sure of it. Overjoyed and full of wonder, she did not stop to open the gate, but ran swiftly back to tell the others. The very man they were praying for was standing there, knocking at the door, she declared.

"Thou art mad," they answered her almost roughly. This was no time for idle imaginations. But there was no doubt she believed what she said. There was a ring of absolute certainty in her voice, and at last some of them began to think that perhaps it was St. Peter's spirit which had stood there.

But the knocking still sounded on the door. Could a spirit knock so loudly? At least it was wiser to open the door

and see who was there. And so at last the gate was cautiously opened, and St. Peter stood before them.

The cries of surprise and delight were checked almost as soon as uttered. There was much need still for caution, and St. Peter held up his hand to command silence. Then, in breathless hush, they led him in, and he told them the story of his deliverance, and how at the angel's touch the chains had fallen from his hands, and the bolts and bars had slipped back.

So for a time St. Peter was still free to carry on his Master's work. But the end, when it came, was as welcome to him as the shining angel had been, for this time it was through the gates of death that he passed into the presence of the King.

We cannot be quite sure by what death the old fisherman saint glorified his Master, but people think that it was at Rome that he gave up his life. An old story tells us that St. Peter was fleeing away from that city to escape death, when, on the great road leading to Rome, he met his Master walking wearily towards the city, carrying a cross upon His back. "Master, whither goest Thou?" asked St. Peter.

"I go to Rome to be crucified in thy place," answered the King. Then St. Peter knew that he had done wrong in leaving his post of duty at which God had put him, and he turned back bravely to meet his death.

It was the same death as that Master had suffered; only, to the humble, loving soul of His servant, it seemed too great an honour to die as his Master had done, and he begged that he might be crucified head downwards, to mark the difference between himself and his King.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SAUL, THE PERSECUTOR

In the far-off city of Tarsus, at the time when Jesus lived at Nazareth, a little boy was born, to whom his parents gave the name of Saul. He was a Roman citizen, because he was born in the Roman province; but he was also a Jew, and was brought up as a very strict Jew indeed. As soon as he could understand anything he was taught lessons out of the Old Testament; and the very first thing he learned would be to reach up and touch the metal box which was fastened to the side of the door, and which held some verses of the Bible written on parchment. Then he would reverently kiss the little hand which had touched the box, just as he saw the grown-up people do.

Although the Bible was his great lesson book, as he grew older there were many other and more difficult things he had to learn; and by the time he was a man he knew all that a strict Pharisee should know, and was very wise and learned indeed.

Rumours, of course, had reached the far-off city of Tarsus about the new Jewish teacher, whom some people called a prophet, and some even said was the Christ. There were tales of His wonderful cures and the miracles He worked; then the news of His Crucifixion and how His followers declared He had risen from the dead. But Saul only grew angry as he listened. The Christ he looked for was a king, not a peasant of Nazareth, and he hated the people who called themselves His followers and said He was the King.

It seemed no use to punish these people, to beat and imprison them, or even to condemn them to death. Nothing daunted them or silenced them. Day by day they grew bolder and bolder, day by day more and more people joined them and

shared their belief. It was time to put an end to all this, and Saul eagerly threw himself into the work, determined to stamp out this new religion. Those followers of the Nazarene might try to hide, but his spies would find them and drag them out; they might think to escape him by fleeing to other cities, but he would follow them wherever they went. He was so busy hunting the poor Christians that he had now no time to do anything else.

It happened just then that one of the chief of those Christians, whose name was Stephen, had been seized at Jerusalem and dragged before the High Priest; and hearing this, Saul eagerly hastened to the great city, that he might help in the trial and punishment.

Surely, as he watched that trial, he must have wondered what made these men so bold and fearless. There stood the young man Stephen, alone amongst his enemies, who crowded round him like a pack of hungry wolves eager to devour a lamb. No sign of terror showed in his calm face. Absolutely fearless, he stood out to meet his accusers and make his defence. The lying witnesses could not meet his straightforward gaze, but watched him with shifty eyes, and acknowledged even to themselves that his face was as the face of an angel.

But all unmoved Saul looked on, and when at last the sentence was given that the prisoner should be stoned, there was no pity in his heart, but rather a fierce joy as he went to look on at the execution.

Steadfastly and unmoved, Stephen stood and faced his murderers. Then, looking up towards heaven, a great glory seemed to shine there as if reflected from above. Little wonder that there was no room for fear in Stephen's heart; for there, as he gazed upwards, he saw his Master's face, and knew that He was waiting at God's right hand to welcome His faithful servant.

The cruel stones came hurtling through the air. Little by little the life was beaten out of his body, but never a sign of shrinking did he show. Only as he knelt there the same prayer rose to his lips which his Master had prayed upon the Cross: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

That was the end. Death, stooping down over the poor, bruised body, showed none of its terrors, but was like a kindly sleep, bringing only healing, rest, and peace.

Saul, looking on, saw all this, but still he fiercely held to his own opinions. The man deserved to die. It was the murderers who were right, not the martyr.

But perhaps the remembrance of St. Stephen's face troubled him more than he knew, and made him try to escape from it by hunting the poor Christians more fiercely than ever, so that soon the very name of Saul was a terror to all the followers of the Master.

He hunted them from their hiding-places. Wherever they fled he followed them. It seemed as if he could not rest; and when news was brought to him that many of the Christians had found a refuge in the city of Damascus, five days' journey from Jerusalem, he prepared at once for a fresh hunt. Taking a guard of soldiers with him, he set out with all haste, anxious to reach Damascus as soon as possible.

At last the city came in sight in all its fair beauty of white buildings, set in a garden of green trees and silver olive groves. But Saul was not thinking of its beauty.

It was mid-day, and most travellers rested then in some shade where they might escape the blinding heat of the sun; but Saul was in too great a hurry to rest, and he pressed forward with his band of soldiers.

The fierce heat beat down upon the white road, and dazzled their eyes; but it was not the sunlight which suddenly wrapped them round with such a blinding glare that the whole company fell with their faces to the ground, as if struck by

lightning. The light was brighter than any sunlight, and from the midst of the light came a strange sound—a sound which to the soldiers seemed only a confused noise, but which Saul knew to be the voice of God.

"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" said the voice.

From the blinded helpless figure lying there upon the ground the words burst out, "Who art Thou, Lord?"

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest," came the voice again.

Saul's proud, fierce spirit was broken. He was as humble as a little child as he listened to that voice. "What shall I do, Lord?" he asked.

There, in the midst of the light, stood Jesus Christ, the King whom he had believed was an impostor. Now, seeing Him as St. Stephen had seen Him, he knew that it was the Master, the Captain of his soul, who spoke to him.

There was a great work before him, said the voice; but first he must go on to the city and wait there until a messenger should come and tell him what he was to do.

The terrified, listening soldiers began to recover. The light had vanished, the noise had ceased, and they stood up upon their feet again. But Saul still lay there, trembling and bewildered, and when they went to raise him they found that he was blind, and could only hold out groping hands in the darkness. So they went on their way as best they could, and led Saul stumbling along the road, until they reached the city.

There for three black days he waited. But in the darkness he learned to pray, and on the third day God's messenger came, and brought light and comfort. The blindness was lifted not only from his eyes, but also from his heart, and he saw clearly that now he must obey the King and fight His battles.



"THE DISCIPLES TOOK HIM BY NIGHT, AND LET HIM DOWN BY THE WALL IN A BASKET."

At first the Christians would scarcely believe that the man they so feared was now their friend, and they still distrusted him; but as time went on they were forced to believe in the great change. Just as thoroughly as he had once led the persecution, he now worked with all his might to help them, eager to show his love for the Master, no matter how much pain and suffering fell to his share.

And before many weeks were past he began to suffer with his fellow- Christians. As he had persecuted others, now he himself was the persecuted, and the Jews made up their minds that he must be seized and put to death. Soldiers were set to guard the city gates, and orders were given to arrest him if he tried to escape.

Now the city walls around Damascus were so solid and broad that many houses were built upon them, and their windows looked over the surrounding fields across the moat below. Some of Saul's friends lived in one of these wall houses, and they felt sure that if Saul was to escape the best plan would be to lower him from one of the windows, out of sight of the city guards. So they took a large basket, and fastened it with a rope, and when Saul had climbed into the basket, they lowered it slowly down against the wall, swaying to and fro until it touched the ground.

No one was in sight. It was easy now to cross the moat and make his way across the fields. Saul had for that time, at least, escaped his enemies.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ST. PAUL, THE SERVANT OF CHRIST

Three years had passed since Saul-who was now known as Paul-had come proudly riding along the road that led from Jerusalem to Damascus, full of power and importance, backed by his guard of soldiers. Now he was stealing back that same way alone and friendless, fleeing for his life. Then he had been the hunter, now he was himself the hunted.

Others might think it a sad change, but St. Paul knew it was a glorious one. There was no fear in his heart, only a great joy; he did not feel in the least lonely, for he had found the best Friend of all, and he rejoiced to have the honour of suffering for his King.

There, at Jerusalem, he knew he would find many friends. St. Peter, the disciple of Jesus, might be there, and the old fisherman saint would tell him all he longed to hear about the wonderful life of the King, and would even repeat the very words which Jesus had spoken. These words now seemed to St. Paul more precious than any gold or silver.

No great welcome, however, awaited him at Jerusalem. His name was still held in terror by those poor, persecuted Christians. It seemed but yesterday that they had seen him watch with triumphant eyes the sufferings of St. Stephen, and it was difficult to believe that he was now their friend. The learned men and the rulers, too, looked upon him with suspicion. Here was a man who had been the keenest of all in persecuting the Christians, and now he came preaching their religion. The simplest and safest plan would be to have nothing to do with him at all.

And so St. Paul found no welcome at Jerusalem, and he made up his mind to return to Tarsus, his native town, and carry the good news to more distant lands. The Master had

said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Strangers and foreigners were to have a share in Christ's kingdom as well as the Jews. It was a dark world, full of evil and the power of Satan. St. Paul held in his hand the lighted torch which was to carry light into distant countries whose names even he did not know. At that very time Roman soldiers were landing on a far-away little gray island of the north, and holding it with a firm, conquering grip. It was a far cry from Tarsus to Britain, but gleams from the lighted torch were to reach even there in time.

Meanwhile St. Paul began his missionary work in places round about Palestine. There was little glory and much suffering in that work which he was doing for his Master. Many a time he was cruelly beaten, and with bruised, torn back, was thrown out of the city where he had been trying to tell the people about their King. Sometimes his wonderful words and the charm of his speaking held men spellbound, and the light spread in a marvellous way; and then again would come a check, and the very people who had listened to him and applauded him were ready to stone him to death.

It was necessary all this time for St. Paul to work with his hands as well as his head, that he might earn enough money for his daily bread, and he was a splendid worker as well as a preacher. His trade was tent-making, and as he sat and wove the strong haircloth, his thoughts would go wandering to those distant lands to which he longed to carry the light. How splendid it would be to go the whole length and breadth of the great Roman Empire—even to Rome itself, that queen city of the world.

Then one night as he lay asleep he dreamed a dream, and saw by his bedside a man from Macedonia, that country across the sea, who came with a message of invitation.

"Come over and help us," said the dream figure. The words rang in St. Paul's ears as he awoke, and the dream decided him. He would travel still farther afield; he would leave Asia, and cross over to Europe.

The Jews were not greatly loved in Roman cities, and St. Paul found many difficulties and dangers awaiting him. Once at the great town of Philippi he and his companion, Silas, were set upon by the crowd, and very roughly handled. There was every sign of a riot, and the Roman magistrates gave orders to the soldiers to beat the two Jews with rods, and to quiet the people. So St. Paul and St. Silas were dragged off to the market-place, stripped to the waist, and tied to the common whipping-post. In vain they declared they were Roman citizens, and not slaves. No one listened to them, and they were flogged in a terrible way, and afterwards thrown into the common jail, a place more fit for beasts than men. Here in the dark dungeon hole they lay, their feet fastened into the wooden stocks fixed in the wall, that there might be no chance of their escape.

Tortured and half-dead, in that noisome prison St. Paul and his companion never let go their courage for one moment. It was for their King they suffered, and that made all suffering easy. In the darkness they sang the old Jewish psalms they knew so well, and the sound of their singing went floating away to the other prison cells. It was a strange, almost awesome thing to hear music in that dreadful place, and the other prisoners listened in terrified wonder.

Night came on. The crowds that had gathered in the market-place around the whipping-post were scattered, and the rioters had gone home. All was quiet; not even a breath of wind stirred the still air, when suddenly a strange shiver seemed to pass over the city, a curious trembling in earth and air. Then came a low, rumbling sound, and a great rocking, as walls swayed and fell, doors burst open, and the very foundations of the great prison shook.

It was an earthquake. The head jailer, leaping to his feet, rushed to his prison wards. The doors were open, as he feared; the stocks were loosened from the walls. All the prisoners must have escaped, and that would mean death for

him. In despair, he drew his sword to put an end to himself at once.

But St. Paul had seen the glittering sword and the jailer's despairing face, and guessed what he meant to do.

"Do thyself no harm," he cried, "for we are all here."



THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER

Hurriedly the jailer called for a light, and sprang into the prison. It was quite true—not one of the prisoners had attempted to escape; and in his relief and thankfulness he threw himself down at St. Paul's feet, and cried out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" It had suddenly flashed upon him that what these men had preached was true, and that they were indeed the servants of the true King.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," came the swift answer.

Then, later, in the jailer's house, when the two prisoners had had their wounds washed and dressed, and had

been carefully fed, the whole family listened while St. Paul spoke to them, and told them how they too might serve the King. So the light of Christ shone into another dark place.

After many perilous journeys to and fro, St. Paul at last returned to Jerusalem, where, among his own people, he might have looked for safety and peace. But the Jews were more furious with him and his preaching than ever, and were determined to kill him, and would have torn him in pieces had it not been for the Roman soldiers, who rescued him out of their hands, and sent him away secretly to another place.

Then, after a weary time of waiting, he was at last brought to trial, and Festus, the governor, asked him if he would rather be sent back to Jerusalem to be judged by his own people.

But St. Paul answered boldly and decidedly: "To the Jews I have done no wrong: I appeal unto Caesar."

It was a bold appeal, and meant that the prisoner demanded to be taken to Rome; but it was an appeal that every Roman citizen had a right to make.

"Hast thou appealed unto Caesar?" asked the governor. "Then to Caesar shalt thou go."

Autumn was coming on, a time when wintry storms swept the seas, and St. Paul's voyage to Italy was a rough one indeed. He had spent much of his time among ships and sailormen, and this was not the first time he had battled through a storm; so he knew, as they tore in front of the shrieking wind, and were carried mountains high upon the green waves, that shipwreck was surely ahead. In vain the sailors threw all they could overboard to lighten the ship, and cast out anchors as a drag they were drifting on the rocks, and nothing could save them.

ing any longer, and then St. Paul took command. He told them God's angel had showed him in a vision that they would all be saved, and he bade them steer the ship into a little

bay off the island of Malta, which lay ahead of them. The sailors listened to his encouraging words, and did as he said; and though in the end the ship was lost, every man on board was saved.



ST. PAUL'S VOYAGE

The men began to lose heart, and to think it was no use struggling. So at last, after many adventures, St. Paul arrived in Rome, the city of his dreams. But here again there was nothing but delay and weary waiting, while he lived the life of a prisoner, chained to his guard. Many were the letters he wrote in that weary time of waiting to the friends he had left behind; and he was also allowed to preach to the Christians who gathered around him, and that cheered him most of all.

Nothing certain is known about his death; but that he gave up his life in his Master's service is sure, and his triumphant words ring out to-day as clearly as when he uttered them: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

CHAPTER XXXV

ST. JOHN, THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

The beautiful world which God in the beginning made full of sunshine and happiness was soon spoilt by the sin which so swiftly crept in, and ever since there has always been sorrow and pain waiting to dim the gladness and darken the light.

But there are some good gifts of God which no pain or sorrow can spoil, that shine out like stars in a dark sky, whose light nothing can quench, and that death itself has no power to dim.

Perhaps one of the best of these gifts, the most precious thing which God can give us, is a friend; some one who understands and loves us, and whom we love and trust with all our hearts. They are rare things, these friends, worth more to us than all the riches of the world, although sometimes we think them as common as the sunshine or the flowers.

When the King of Heaven came down to earth, to live the life of common men, He too had a little company of friends around Him, who truly loved Him, and whom He loved. But among them all there was one special friend, one special gift from God, St. John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

No one else seemed to live quite as close to Jesus as he. No one was as quick to understand the Master, to guess His wishes almost before they were put into words. St. John did not, like St. Peter, boast of his love and devotion, but he quietly followed his Master, and never left him.

Whenever it was possible, St. John was always to be found at Jesus' side. At the Last Supper, when all the sorrowing friends gathered round him, St. John was nearest,

and even leaned his head against his Friend. When cruel hands had nailed the King to the Cross, it was St. John who stood close beneath, beside the only other person who had courage to be there—the Lord's dear mother.



"THE ANGEL WHICH SHEWED ME THESE THINGS."

The King, looking down, saw these two good gifts which God had given Him—His mother and His friend—and they were very precious in His eyes. To the friend He would give the most sacred thing which He had to leave behind Him.

"Woman," He said, "behold thy son," and to St. John, "Son, behold thy mother."

All through his life St. John's love had never failed. Like many other of the friends of Jesus, he suffered pains and punishments for his Master's sake; and at last, when he was an old man, worn out with suffering, he was banished to the island of Patmos, and left there alone, as it seemed, friendless and deserted.

It might well be that the lonely old man felt as if his life had been a failure, and was almost bewildered to see how evil had triumphed over good. He had not only suffered himself, but he had seen the terrible sufferings of many other servants of the King. There had been no pity for the Christians. Even young girls and children had been flung to the wild beasts, because they would not deny their Lord. The King had been his Friend; and yet here he was, old, worn out, and alone, deserted by every one, thrust away from the sound of any human voice.

But he was not really alone. His Friend was close at hand, who had never left him, and He lifted the veil which hung between them, and showed St. John a glimpse of Heaven, a revelation of unseen things. St. John's weary eyes had been looking at the mistakes and failures and puzzles of the world, until these seemed to him bigger than anything else; now he was to see with clearer vision how wonderfully everything had been planned by God. He was to see the friends of the King sharing His glory, all sorrow, sin, and suffering forgotten, since God had wiped away all tears from their eyes.

But all these things were as nothing compared to the sight of his Master's face, to the knowledge that his King and unchanging Friend was there, ruling all things, and that some day He would come again, when every eye would see Him.

There, upon the throne, was his dear Master, bearing still the marks of the cruel nails, "a Lamb as it had been slain." There around Him, all things in Heaven and earth bowed down and worshipped Him.



FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH—EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYRS

Many were the glorious things shown to St. John by God's angel, and afterwards the lonely saint on the desert island tried to write down an account of the wonders he had seen. He wrote of a golden city with its walls of jasper and its gates of pearl, of the crystal river and the jewelled throne set around with a rainbow halo, of white-robed angels and golden harps.

"Behold, I come quickly," had been the comforting words of the King, when for that wonderful moment the veil had been lifted; and St. John's answer rang out full of faith now as well as love—

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

THE END