

LAGERLÖF SELMA

CHRIST
LEGENDS

Selma Lagerlöf
Christ Legends

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Selma Lagerlöf

Christ Legends

THE HOLY NIGHT

When I was five years old I had such a great sorrow! I hardly know if I have had a greater since. It was then my grandmother died. Up to that time, she used to sit every day on the corner sofa in her room, and tell stories.

I remember that grandmother told story after story from morning till night, and that we children sat beside her, quite still, and listened. It was a glorious life! No other children had such happy times as we did.

It isn't much that I recollect about my grandmother. I remember that she had very beautiful snow-white hair, and stooped when she walked, and that she always sat and knitted a stocking.

And I even remember that when she had finished a story, she used to lay her hand on my head and say: "All this is as true, as true as that I see you and you see me."

I also remember that she could sing songs, but this she did not do every day. One of the songs was about a knight and a sea-troll, and had this refrain: "It blows cold, cold weather at sea."

Then I remember a little prayer she taught me, and a verse of a hymn.

Of all the stories she told me, I have but a dim and imperfect recollection. Only one of them do I remember so well that I should be able to repeat it. It is a little story about Jesus' birth.

Well, this is nearly all that I can recall about my grandmother, except the thing which I remember best; and that is, the great loneliness when she was gone.

I remember the morning when the corner sofa stood empty and when it was impossible to understand how the days would ever come to an end. That I remember. That I shall never forget!

And I recollect that we children were brought forward to kiss the hand of the dead and that we were afraid to do it. But then some one said to us that it would be the last time we could thank grandmother for all the pleasure she had given us.

And I remember how the stories and songs were driven from the homestead, shut up in a long black casket, and how they never came back again.

I remember that something was gone from our lives. It seemed as if the door to a whole beautiful, enchanted world – where before we had been free to go in and out – had been closed. And now there was no one who knew how to open that door.

And I remember that, little by little, we children learned to play with dolls and toys, and to live like other children. And then it seemed as though we no longer missed our grandmother, or remembered her.

But even to-day – after forty years – as I sit here and gather together the legends about Christ, which I heard out there in the Orient, there awakes within me the little legend of Jesus' birth that my grandmother used to tell, and I feel impelled to tell it once again, and to let it also be included in my collection.

It was a Christmas Day and all the folks had driven to church except grandmother and I. I believe we were all alone in the house. We had not been permitted to go along, because one of us was too old and the other was too young. And we were sad, both of us, because we had not been taken to early mass to hear the singing and to see the Christmas candles.

But as we sat there in our loneliness, grandmother began to tell a story.

"There was a man," said she, "who went out in the dark night to borrow live coals to kindle a fire. He went from hut to hut and knocked. 'Dear friends, help me!' said he. 'My wife has just given birth to a child, and I must make a fire to warm her and the little one.'

“But it was way in the night, and all the people were asleep. No one replied.

“The man walked and walked. At last he saw the gleam of a fire a long way off. Then he went in that direction, and saw that the fire was burning in the open. A lot of sheep were sleeping around the fire, and an old shepherd sat and watched over the flock.

“When the man who wanted to borrow fire came up to the sheep, he saw that three big dogs lay asleep at the shepherd’s feet. All three awoke when the man approached and opened their great jaws, as though they wanted to bark; but not a sound was heard. The man noticed that the hair on their backs stood up and that their sharp, white teeth glistened in the firelight. They dashed toward him. He felt that one of them bit at his leg and one at his hand and that one clung to his throat. But their jaws and teeth wouldn’t obey them, and the man didn’t suffer the least harm.

“Now the man wished to go farther, to get what he needed. But the sheep lay back to back and so close to one another that he couldn’t pass them. Then the man stepped upon their backs and walked over them and up to the fire. And not one of the animals awoke or moved.”

Thus far, grandmother had been allowed to narrate without interruption. But at this point I couldn’t help breaking in. “Why didn’t they do it, grandma?” I asked.

“That you shall hear in a moment,” said grandmother – and went on with her story.

“When the man had almost reached the fire, the shepherd looked up. He was a surly old man, who was unfriendly and harsh toward human beings. And when he saw the strange man coming, he seized the long spiked staff, which he always held in his hand when he tended his flock, and threw it at him. The staff came right toward the man, but, before it reached him, it turned off to one side and whizzed past him, far out in the meadow.”

When grandmother had got this far, I interrupted her again. “Grandma, why wouldn’t the stick hurt the man?” Grandmother did not bother about answering me, but continued her story.

“Now the man came up to the shepherd and said to him: ‘Good man, help me, and lend me a little fire! My wife has just given birth to a child, and I must make a fire to warm her and the little one.’

“The shepherd would rather have said no, but when he pondered that the dogs couldn’t hurt the man, and the sheep had not run from him, and that the staff had not wished to strike him, he was a little afraid, and dared not deny the man that which he asked.

“‘Take as much as you need!’ he said to the man.

“But then the fire was nearly burnt out. There were no logs or branches left, only a big heap of live coals; and the stranger had neither spade nor shovel, wherein he could carry the red-hot coals.

“When the shepherd saw this, he said again: ‘Take as much as you need!’ And he was glad that the man wouldn’t be able to take away any coals.

“But the man stooped and picked coals from the ashes with his bare hands, and laid them in his mantle. And he didn’t burn his hands when he touched them, nor did the coals scorch his mantle; but he carried them away as if they had been nuts or apples.”

But here the story-teller was interrupted for the third time. “Grandma, why wouldn’t the coals burn the man?”

“That you shall hear,” said grandmother, and went on:

“And when the shepherd, who was such a cruel and hard-hearted man, saw all this, he began to wonder to himself: ‘What kind of a night is this, when the dogs do not bite, the sheep are not scared, the staff does not kill, or the fire scorch?’ He called the stranger back, and said to him: ‘What kind of a night is this? And how does it happen that all things show you compassion?’

“Then said the man: ‘I cannot tell you if you yourself do not see it.’ And he wished to go his way, that he might soon make a fire and warm his wife and child.

“But the shepherd did not wish to lose sight of the man before he had found out what all this might portend. He got up and followed the man till they came to the place where he lived.

“Then the shepherd saw that the man didn’t have so much as a hut to dwell in, but that his wife and babe were lying in a mountain grotto, where there was nothing except the cold and naked stone walls.

“But the shepherd thought that perhaps the poor innocent child might freeze to death there in the grotto; and, although he was a hard man, he was touched, and thought he would like to help it. And he loosened his knapsack from his shoulder, took from it a soft white sheepskin, gave it to the strange man, and said that he should let the child sleep on it.

“But just as soon as he showed that he, too, could be merciful, his eyes were opened, and he saw what he had not been able to see before and heard what he could not have heard before.

“He saw that all around him stood a ring of little silver-winged angels, and each held a stringed instrument, and all sang in loud tones that to-night the Saviour was born who should redeem the world from its sins.

“Then he understood how all things were so happy this night that they didn’t want to do anything wrong.

“And it was not only around the shepherd that there were angels, but he saw them everywhere. They sat inside the grotto, they sat outside on the mountain, and they flew under the heavens. They came marching in great companies, and, as they passed, they paused and cast a glance at the child.

“There were such jubilation and such gladness and songs and play! And all this he saw in the dark night, whereas before he could not have made out anything. He was so happy because his eyes had been opened that he fell upon his knees and thanked God.”

Here grandmother sighed and said: “What that shepherd saw we might also see, for the angels fly down from heaven every Christmas Eve, if we could only see them.”

Then grandmother laid her hand on my head, and said: “You must remember this, for it is as true, as true as that I see you and you see me. It is not revealed by the light of lamps or candles, and it does not depend upon sun and moon; but that which is needful is, that we have such eyes as can see God’s glory.”

THE EMPEROR'S VISION

It happened at the time when Augustus was Emperor in Rome and Herod was King in Jerusalem.

It was then that a very great and holy night sank down over the earth. It was the darkest night that any one had ever seen. One could have believed that the whole earth had fallen into a cellar-vault. It was impossible to distinguish water from land, and one could not find one's way on the most familiar road. And it couldn't be otherwise, for not a ray of light came from heaven. All the stars stayed at home in their own houses, and the fair moon held her face averted.

The silence and the stillness were as profound as the darkness. The rivers stood still in their courses, the wind did not stir, and even the aspen leaves had ceased to quiver. Had any one walked along the seashore, he would have found that the waves no longer dashed upon the sands; and had one wandered in the desert, the sand would not have crunched under one's feet. Everything was as motionless as if turned to stone, so as not to disturb the holy night. The grass was afraid to grow, the dew could not fall, and the flowers dared not exhale their perfume.

On this night the wild beasts did not seek their prey, the serpents did not sting, and the dogs did not bark. And what was even more glorious, inanimate things would have been unwilling to disturb the night's sanctity, by lending themselves to an evil deed. No false key could have picked a lock, and no knife could possibly have drawn a drop of blood.

In Rome, during this very night, a small company of people came from the Emperor's palace at the Palatine and took the path across the Forum which led to the Capitol. During the day just ended the Senators had asked the Emperor if he had any objections to their erecting a temple to him on Rome's sacred hill. But Augustus had not immediately given his consent. He did not know if it would be agreeable to the gods that he should own a temple next to theirs, and he had replied that first he wished to ascertain their will in the matter by offering a nocturnal sacrifice to his genius. It was he who, accompanied by a few trusted friends, was on his way to perform this sacrifice.

Augustus let them carry him in his litter, for he was old, and it was an effort for him to climb the long stairs leading to the Capitol. He himself held the cage with the doves for the sacrifice. No priests or soldiers or senators accompanied him, only his nearest friends. Torch-bearers walked in front of him in order to light the way in the night darkness and behind him followed the slaves, who carried the tripod, the knives, the charcoal, the sacred fire, and all the other things needed for the sacrifice.

On the way the Emperor chatted gaily with his faithful followers, and therefore none of them noticed the infinite silence and stillness of the night. Only when they had reached the highest point of the Capitol Hill and the vacant spot upon which they contemplated erecting the temple, did it dawn upon them that something unusual was taking place.

It could not be a night like all others, for up on the very edge of the cliff they saw the most remarkable being! At first they thought it was an old, distorted olive-trunk; later they imagined that an ancient stone figure from the temple of Jupiter had wandered out on the cliff. Finally it was apparent to them that it could be only the old sibyl.

Anything so aged, so weather-beaten, and so giant-like in stature they had never seen. This old woman was awe-inspiring! If the Emperor had not been present, they would all have fled to their homes.

"It is she," they whispered to each other, "who has lived as many years as there are sand-grains on her native shores. Why has she come out from her cave just to-night? What does she foretell for the Emperor and the Empire – she, who writes her prophecies on the leaves of the trees and knows that the wind will carry the words of the oracle to the person for whom they are intended?"

They were so terrified that they would have dropped on their knees with their foreheads pressed against the earth, had the sibyl stirred. But she sat as still as though she were lifeless. Crouching upon

the outermost edge of the cliff, and shading her eyes with her hand, she peered out into the night. She sat there as if she had gone up on the hill that she might see more clearly something that was happening far away. *She* could see things on a night like this!

At that moment the Emperor and all his retinue marked how profound the darkness was. None of them could see a hand's breadth in front of him. And what stillness! What silence! Not even the Tiber's hollow murmur could they hear. The air seemed to suffocate them, cold sweat broke out on their foreheads, and their hands were numb and powerless. They feared that some dreadful disaster was impending.

But no one cared to show that he was afraid, and everyone told the Emperor that this was a good omen. All Nature held its breath to greet a new god.

They counseled Augustus to hurry with the sacrifice, and said that the old sibyl had evidently come out of her cave to greet his genius.

But the truth was that the old sibyl was so absorbed in a vision that she did not even know that Augustus had come up to the Capitol. She was transported in spirit to a far-distant land, where she imagined that she was wandering over a great plain. In the darkness she stubbed her foot continually against something, which she believed to be grass-tufts. She stooped down and felt with her hand. No, it was not grass, but sheep. She was walking between great sleeping flocks of sheep.

Then she noticed the shepherds' fire. It burned in the middle of the field, and she groped her way to it. The shepherds lay asleep by the fire, and beside them were the long, spiked staves with which they defended their flocks from wild beasts. But the little animals with the glittering eyes and the bushy tails that stole up to the fire, were they not jackals? And yet the shepherds did not fling their staves at them, the dogs continued to sleep, the sheep did not flee, and the wild animals lay down to rest beside the human beings.

This the sibyl saw, but she knew nothing of what was being enacted on the hill back of her. She did not know that there they were raising an altar, lighting charcoal and strewing incense, and that the Emperor took one of the doves from the cage to sacrifice it. But his hands were so benumbed that he could not hold the bird. With one stroke of the wing, it freed itself and disappeared in the night darkness.

When this happened, the courtiers glanced suspiciously at the old sibyl. They believed that it was she who caused the misfortune.

Could they know that all the while the sibyl thought herself standing beside the shepherds' fire, and that she listened to a faint sound which came trembling through the dead-still night? She heard it long before she marked that it did not come from the earth, but from the sky. At last she raised her head; then she saw light, shimmering forms glide forward in the darkness. They were little flocks of angels, who, singing joyously, and apparently searching, flew back and forth above the wide plain.

While the sibyl was listening to the angel-song, the Emperor was making preparations for a new sacrifice. He washed his hands, cleansed the altar, and took up the other dove. And, although he exerted his full strength to hold it fast, the dove's slippery body slid from his hand, and the bird swung itself up into the impenetrable night.

The Emperor was appalled! He fell upon his knees and prayed to his genius. He implored him for strength to avert the disasters which this night seemed to foreshadow.

Nor did the sibyl hear any of this either. She was listening with her whole soul to the angel-song, which grew louder and louder. At last it became so powerful that it wakened the shepherds. They raised themselves on their elbows and saw shining hosts of silver-white angels move in the darkness in long, swaying lines, like migratory birds. Some held lutes and cymbals in their hands; others held zithers and harps, and their song rang out as merry as child-laughter, and as care-free as the lark's trill. When the shepherds heard this, they rose up to go to the mountain city, where they lived, to tell of the miracle.

They groped their way forward on a narrow, winding path, and the sibyl followed them. Suddenly it grew light up there on the mountain: a big, clear star kindled right over it, and the city on the mountain summit glittered like silver in the starlight. All the fluttering angel throngs hastened thither, shouting for joy, and the shepherds hurried so that they almost ran. When they reached the city, they found that the angels had assembled over a low stable near the city gate. It was a wretched structure, with a roof of straw and the naked cliff for a back wall. Over it hung the Star, and hither flocked more and more angels. Some seated themselves on the straw roof or alighted upon the steep mountain-wall back of the house; others, again, held themselves in the air on outspread wings, and hovered over it. High, high up, the air was illuminated by the shining wings.

The instant the Star kindled over the mountain city, all Nature awoke, and the men who stood upon Capitol Hill could not help seeing it. They felt fresh, but caressing winds which traveled through space; delicious perfumes streamed up about them; trees swayed; the Tiber began to murmur; the stars twinkled, and suddenly the moon stood out in the sky and lit up the world. And out of the clouds the two doves came circling down and lighted upon the Emperor's shoulders.

When this miracle happened, Augustus rose, proud and happy, but his friends and his slaves fell on their knees.

"Hail, Cæsar!" they cried. "Thy genius hath answered thee. Thou art the god who shall be worshiped on Capitol Hill!"

And this cry of homage, which the men in their transport gave as a tribute to the Emperor, was so loud that the old sibyl heard it. It waked her from her visions. She rose from her place on the edge of the cliff, and came down among the people. It was as if a dark cloud had arisen from the abyss and rushed down the mountain height. She was terrifying in her extreme age! Coarse hair hung in matted tangles around her head, her joints were enlarged, and the dark skin, hard as the bark of a tree, covered her body with furrow upon furrow.

Potent and awe-inspiring, she advanced toward the Emperor. With one hand she clutched his wrist, with the other she pointed toward the distant East.

"Look!" she commanded, and the Emperor raised his eyes and saw. The vaulted heavens opened before his eyes, and his glance traveled to the distant Orient. He saw a lowly stable behind a steep rock wall, and in the open doorway a few shepherds kneeling. Within the stable he saw a young mother on her knees before a little child, who lay upon a bundle of straw on the floor.

And the sibyl's big, knotty fingers pointed toward the poor babe. "Hail, Cæsar!" cried the sibyl, in a burst of scornful laughter. "There is the god who shall be worshiped on Capitol Hill!"

Then Augustus shrank back from her, as from a maniac. But upon the sibyl fell the mighty spirit of prophecy. Her dim eyes began to burn, her hands were stretched toward heaven, her voice was so changed that it seemed not to be her own, but rang out with such resonance and power that it could have been heard over the whole world. And she uttered words which she appeared to be reading among the stars.

"Upon Capitol Hill shall the Redeemer of the world be worshiped, —*Christ*— but not frail mortals."

When she had said this, she strode past the terror-stricken men, walked slowly down the mountain, and disappeared.

But, on the following day, Augustus strictly forbade the people to raise any temple to him on Capitol Hill. In place of it he built a sanctuary to the new-born God-Child, and called it Heaven's Altar —*Ara Cæli*.

THE WISE MEN'S WELL

In old Judea the Drought crept, gaunt and hollow-eyed, between shrunken thistles and yellowed grass.

It was summertime. The sun beat down upon the backs of unshaded hills, and the slightest breath of wind tore up thick clouds of lime dust from the grayish-white ground. The herds stood huddled together in the valleys, by the dried-up streams.

The Drought walked about and viewed the water supplies. He wandered over to Solomon's Pools, and sighed as he saw that they still held a small quantity of water from their mountain sources. Then he journeyed down to the famous David's Well, near Bethlehem, and found water even there. Finally, he tramped with shuffling gait toward the great highway which leads from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

When he had arrived about half-way, he saw the Wise Men's Well, where it stands close by the roadside. He saw at a glance that it was almost dry. He seated himself on the curb, which consists of a single stone hollowed out, and looked into the well. The shining water-mirror, which usually was seen very near the opening, had sunk deep down, and the dirt and slime at the bottom of the well made it muddy and impure.

When the Well beheld the Drought's bronzed visage reflected in her clouded mirror, she shook with anguish.

"I wonder when you will be exhausted," said the Drought. "Surely, you do not expect to find any fresh water source, down there in the deep, to come and give you new life; and as for rain – God be praised! there can be no question of that for the next two or three months."

"You may rest content," sighed the Well, "for nothing can help me now. It would take no less than a well-spring from Paradise to save me!"

"Then I will not forsake you until every drop has been drained," said the Drought. He saw that the old Well was nearing its end, and now he wanted to have the pleasure of seeing it die out drop by drop.

He seated himself comfortably on the edge of the curb, and rejoiced as he heard how the Well sighed down there in the deep. He also took a keen delight in watching the thirsty wayfarers come up to the well-curb, let down the bucket, and draw it up again, with only a few drops of muddy water.

Thus the whole day passed; and when darkness descended, the Drought looked again into the Well. A little water still shimmered down there. "I'll stay here all night," cried he, "so do not hurry yourself! When it grows so light that I can look into you once more, I am certain that all will be over with you."

The Drought curled himself up on the edge of the well-curb, while the hot night, which was even more cruel, and more full of torment than the day had been, descended over Judea. Dogs and jackals howled incessantly, and thirsty cows and asses answered them from their stuffy stalls.

When the breeze stirred a little now and then, it brought with it no relief, but was as hot and suffocating as a great sleeping monster's panting breath. The stars shone with the most resplendent brilliancy, and a little silvery new moon cast a pretty blue-green light over the gray hills. And in this light the Drought saw a great caravan come marching toward the hill where the Wise Men's Well was situated.

The Drought sat and gazed at the long procession, and rejoiced again at the thought of all the thirst which was coming to the well, and would not find one drop of water with which to slake itself. There were so many animals and drivers they could easily have emptied the Well, even if it had been quite full. Suddenly he began to think there was something unusual, something ghost-like, about this caravan which came marching forward in the night. First, all the camels came within sight on a hill, which loomed up, high and distinct, against the horizon; it was as though they had stepped straight

down from heaven. They also appeared to be larger than ordinary camels, and bore – all too lightly – the enormous burdens which weighted them.

Still he could not understand anything but that they were absolutely real, for to him they were just as plain as plain could be. He could even see that the three foremost animals were dromedaries, with gray, shiny skins; and that they were richly bridled and saddled, with fringed coverings, and were ridden by handsome, noble-looking knights.

The whole procession stopped at the well. With three sharp jerks, the dromedaries lay down on the ground, and their riders dismounted. The pack-camels remained standing, and as they assembled they seemed to form a long line of necks and humps and peculiarly piled-up packs.

Immediately, the riders came up to the Drought and greeted him by laying their hands upon their foreheads and breasts. He saw that they wore dazzling white robes and huge turbans, on the front of each of which there was a clear, glittering star, which shone as if it had been taken direct from the skies.

“We come from a far-off land,” said one of the strangers, “and we bid thee tell us if this is in truth the Wise Men’s Well?”

“It is called so to-day,” said the Drought, “but by to-morrow there will be no well here. It shall die to-night.”

“I can understand this, as I see thee here,” said the man. “But is not this one of the sacred wells, which never run dry? or whence hath it derived its name?”

“I know it is sacred,” said the Drought, “but what good will that do? The three wise men are in Paradise.”

The three travelers exchanged glances. “Dost thou really know the history of this ancient well?” asked they.

“I know the history of all wells and fountains and brooks and rivers,” said the Drought, with pride.

“Then grant us a pleasure, and tell us the story!” begged the strangers; and they seated themselves around the old enemy to everything growing, and listened.

The Drought shook himself and crawled up on the well-curb, like a story-teller upon his improvised throne, and began his tale.

“In Gebas, in Media, a city which lies near the border of the desert – and, therefore, it has often been a free and well-beloved city to me, – there lived, many, many years ago, three men who were famed for their wisdom.

“They were also very poor, which was a most uncommon state of affairs; for, in Gebas, knowledge was held in high esteem, and was well recompensed. With these men, however, it could hardly have been otherwise, for one of them was very old, one was afflicted with leprosy, and the third was a black, thick-lipped negro. People regarded the first as much too old to teach them anything; the second they avoided for fear of contagion; and the third they would not listen to, because they thought they knew that no wisdom had ever come from Ethiopia.

“Meanwhile, the three wise ones became united through their common misery. They begged during the day at the same temple gate, and at night they slept on the same roof. In this way they at least had an opportunity to while away the hours, by meditating upon all the wonderful things which they observed in Nature and in the human race.

“One night, as they slept side by side on a roof, which was overgrown with stupefying red poppies, the eldest among them awoke; and hardly had he cast a glance around him, before he wakened the other two.

“‘Praised be our poverty, which compels us to sleep in the open!’ he said to them. ‘Awake! and raise your eyes to heaven!’

“Well,” said the Drought, in a somewhat milder tone, “this was a night which no one who witnessed it can ever forget! The skies were so bright that the heavens, which usually resemble an

arched vault, looked deep and transparent and full of waves, like a sea. The light surged backwards and forwards and the stars swam in their varying depths: some in among the light-waves; others upon the surface.

“But farthest away and highest up, the three men saw a faint shadow appear. This shadow traveled through space like a ball, and came nearer and nearer, and, as the ball approached, it began to brighten. But it brightened as roses do – may God let them all wither! – when they burst from their buds. It grew bigger and bigger, the dark cover about it turned back by degrees, and light broke forth on its sides into four distinct leaves. Finally, when it had descended to the nearest of the stars, it came to a standstill. Then the dark lobes curled themselves back and unfolded leaf upon leaf of beautiful, shimmering, rose-colored light, until it was perfect, and shone like a star among stars.

“When the poor men beheld this, their wisdom told them that at this moment a mighty king was born on earth: one, whose majesty and power should rise higher than that of Cyrus or of Alexander; and they said to one another: ‘Let us go to the father and mother of the new-born babe and tell them what we have seen! Mayhap they will reward us with a purse of coin or a bracelet of gold.’

“They grasped their long traveling staves and went forth. They wandered through the city and out from the city gate; but there they felt doubtful for a moment as they saw before them the great stretch of dry, smooth desert, which human beings dread. Then they saw the new star cast a narrow stream of light across the desert sand, and they wandered confidently forward with the star as their guide.

“All night long they tramped over the wide sand-plain, and throughout the entire journey they talked about the young, new-born king, whom they should find reposing in a cradle of gold, playing with precious stones. They whiled away the hours by talking over how they should approach his father, the king, and his mother, the queen, and tell them that the heavens augured for their son power and beauty and joy, greater than Solomon’s. They prided themselves upon the fact that God had called *them* to see the Star. They said to themselves that the parents of the new-born babe would not reward them with less than twenty purses of gold; perhaps they would give them so much gold that they no longer need suffer the pangs of poverty.

“I lay in wait on the desert like a lion,” said the Drought, “and intended to throw myself upon these wanderers with all the agonies of thirst, but they eluded me. All night the Star had led them, and on the morrow, when the heavens brightened and all the other stars grew pale, it remained steady and illumined the desert, and then guided them to an oasis where they found a spring and a ripe, fruit-bearing tree. There they rested all that day. And toward night, as they saw the Star’s rays border the sands, they went on.

“From the human way of looking at things,” continued the Drought, “it was a delightful journey. The Star led them in such a way that they did not have to suffer either hunger or thirst. It led them past the sharp thistles, it avoided the thick, loose, flying sand; they escaped the burning sunshine and the hot desert storms. The three wise men said repeatedly to one another: ‘God is protecting us and blessing our journey. We are His messengers.’

“Then, by degrees, they fell into my power,” said the Drought. “These star-wanderers’ hearts became transformed into as dry a desert as the one which they traveled through. They were filled with impotent pride and destructive greed.

“‘We are God’s messengers!’ repeated the three wise ones. ‘The father of the new-born king will not reward us too well, even if he gives us a caravan laden with gold.’

“By and by, the Star led them over the far-famed River Jordan, and up among the hills of Judea. One night it stood still over the little city of Bethlehem, which lay upon a hill-top, and shone among the olive trees.

“But the three wise ones looked around for castles and fortified towers and walls, and all the other things that belong to a royal city; but of such they saw nothing. And what was still worse, the Star’s light did not even lead them into the city, but remained over a grotto near the wayside. There,

the soft light stole in through the opening and revealed to the three wanderers a little Child, who was being lulled to sleep in its mother's arms.

"Although the three men saw how the Star's light encircled the Child's head, like a crown, they remained standing outside the grotto. They did not enter to prophesy honors and kingdoms for this little One. They turned away without betraying their presence. They fled from the Child, and wandered down the hill again.

"Have we come in search of beggars as poor as ourselves?" said they. 'Has God brought us hither that we might mock Him, and predict honors for a shepherd's son? This Child will never attain any higher distinction than to tend sheep here in the valleys.'"

The Drought chuckled to himself and nodded to his hearers, as much as to say: "Am I not right? There are things which are drier than the desert sands, but there is nothing more barren than the human heart."

"The three wise ones had not wandered very far before they thought they had gone astray and had not followed the Star rightly," continued the Drought. "They turned their gaze upward to find again the Star, and the right road; but then the Star which they had followed all the way from the Orient had vanished from the heavens."

The three strangers made a quick movement, and their faces expressed deep suffering.

"That which now happened," continued the Drought, "is in accord with the usual manner of mankind in judging of what is, perhaps, a blessing.

"To be sure, when the three wise men no longer saw the Star, they understood at once that they had sinned against God.

"And it happened with them," continued the Drought furiously, "just as it happens with the ground in the autumn, when the heavy rains begin to fall. They shook with terror, as one shakes when it thunders and lightens; their whole being softened, and humility, like green grass, sprang up in their souls.

"For three nights and days they wandered about the country, in quest of the Child whom they would worship; but the Star did not appear to them. They grew more and more bewildered, and suffered the most overwhelming anguish and despair. On the third day they came to this well to drink. Then God had pardoned their sin. And, as they bent over the water, they saw in its depths the reflection of the Star which had brought them from the Orient. Instantly they saw it also in the heavens and it led them again to the grotto in Bethlehem, where they fell upon their knees before the Child and said: 'We bring thee golden vessels filled with incense and costly spices. Thou shalt be the greatest king that ever lived upon earth, from its creation even unto its destruction.'

"Then the Child laid his hand upon their lowered heads, and when they rose, lo! the Child had given them gifts greater than a king could have granted; for the old beggar had grown young, the leper was made whole, and the negro was transformed into a beautiful white man. And it is said of them that they were glorious! and that they departed and became kings – each in his own kingdom."

The Drought paused in his story, and the three strangers praised it. "Thou hast spoken well," said they. "But it surprises me," said one of them, "that the three wise men do nothing for the well which showed them the Star. Shall they entirely forget such a great blessing?"

"Should not this well remain perpetually," said the second stranger, "to remind mankind that happiness, which is lost on the heights of pride and vainglory, will let itself be found again in the depths of humility?"

"Are the departed worse than the living?" asked the third. "Does gratitude die with those who live in Paradise?"

But as he heard this, the Drought sprang up with a wild cry. He had recognized the strangers! He understood who the strangers were, and fled from them like a madman, that he might not witness how The Three Wise Men called their servants and led their camels, laden with water-sacks, to the Well and filled the poor dying Well with water, which they had brought with them from Paradise.

BETHLEHEM'S CHILDREN

Just outside the Bethlehem gate stood a Roman soldier, on guard. He was arrayed in full armor, with helmet. At his side he wore a short sword, and held in his hand a long spear. He stood there all day almost motionless, so that one could readily have believed him to be a man made of iron. The city people went in and out of the gate and beggars lolled in the shade under the archway, fruit venders and wine dealers set their baskets and jugs down on the ground beside the soldier, but he scarcely took the trouble to turn his head to look at them.

It seemed as though he wanted to say: This is nothing to see. What do I care about you who labor and barter and come driving with oil casks and wine sacks! Let me see an army prepare to meet the enemy! Let me see the excitement and the hot struggle, when horsemen charge down upon a troop of foot-soldiers! Let me see the brave men who rush forward to scale the walls of a beleaguered city! Nothing is pleasing to my sight but war. I long to see the Roman Eagles glisten in the air! I long for the trumpets' blast, for shining weapons, for the splash of red blood!

Just beyond the city gate lay a fine meadow, overgrown with lilies. Day by day the soldier stood with his eyes turned toward this meadow, but never for a moment did he think of admiring the extraordinary beauty of the flowers. Sometimes he noticed that the passers-by stopped to admire the lilies, and it amazed him to think that people would delay their travels to look at anything so trivial. These people do not know what is beautiful, thought he.

And as he thought thus, he saw no more the green fields and olive groves round about Bethlehem; but dreamed himself away in a burning-hot desert in sunny Libya. He saw a legion of soldiers march forward in a long, straight line over the yellow, trackless sand. There was no protection against the sun's piercing rays, no cooling stream, no apparent boundaries to the desert, and no goal in sight, no end to their wanderings. He saw soldiers, exhausted by hunger and thirst, march forward with faltering step; he saw one after another drop to the ground, overcome by the scorching heat. Nevertheless, they marched onward without a murmur, without a thought of deserting their leader and turning back.

Now, *there* is something beautiful! thought the soldier, something that is worth the glance of a valiant man!

Since the soldier stood on guard at the same post day after day, he had the best opportunity to watch the pretty children who played about him. But it was with the children as with the flowers: he didn't understand that it could be worth his while to notice them. What is this to rejoice over? thought he, when he saw people smile as they watched the children's games. It is strange that any one can find pleasure in a mere nothing.

One day when the soldier was standing at his accustomed post, he saw a little boy about three years old come out on the meadow to play. He was a poor lad, who was dressed in a scanty sheepskin, and who played quite by himself. The soldier stood and regarded the newcomer almost without being aware of it himself. The first thing that attracted him was that the little one ran so lightly over the field that he seemed scarcely to touch the tips of the grass-blades. Later, as he followed the child's play, he was even more astonished. "By my sword!" he exclaimed, "this child does not play like the others. What can it be that occupies him?"

As the child played only a few paces away, he could see well enough what the little one was doing. He saw how he reached out his hand to capture a bee that sat upon the edge of a flower and was so heavily laden with pollen that it could hardly lift its wings for flight. He saw, to his great surprise, that the bee let itself be taken without trying to escape, and without using its sting. When the little one held the bee secure between his fingers, he ran over to a crack in the city wall, where a swarm of bees had their home, and set the bee down. As soon as he had helped one bee in this way, he hastened back to help another. All day long the soldier saw him catch bees and carry them to their home.

“That boy is certainly more foolish than any I’ve seen hitherto,” thought the soldier. “What put it into his head to try and help these bees, who can take such good care of themselves without him, and who can sting him at that? What kind of a man will he become if he lives, I wonder?”

The little one came back day after day and played in the meadow, and the soldier couldn’t help marveling at him and his games.

“It is very strange,” thought he. “Here I have stood on guard for fully three years, and thus far I have seen nothing that could interest me, except this infant.”

But the soldier was in nowise pleased with the child; quite the reverse! For this child reminded him of a dreadful prediction made by an old Hebrew seer, who had prophesied that a time of peace should come to this world some day; during a period of a thousand years no blood would be shed, no wars waged, but human beings would love one another like brethren. When the soldier thought that anything so dreadful might really come to pass, a shudder passed through his body, and he gripped his spear hard, as if he sought support.

And now, the more the soldier saw of the little one and his play, the more he thought of the Thousand-year Reign of Peace. He did not fear that it had come already, but he did not like to be reminded of anything so hateful!

One day, when the little one was playing among the flowers on the pretty meadow, a very heavy shower came bursting through the clouds. When he noticed how big and heavy the drops were that beat down upon the sensitive lilies, he seemed anxious for his pretty friends. He hurried away to the biggest and loveliest among them, and bent towards the ground the stiff stalk which held up the lily, so that the raindrops caught the chalices on their under side. As soon as he had treated one flower like this, he ran to another and bent its stem in the same way, so that the flower-cups were turned toward the ground. And then to a third and a fourth, until all the flowers in the meadow were protected against the rainfall.

The soldier smiled to himself when he saw the boy’s work. “I’m afraid the lilies won’t thank him for this,” said he. “Naturally, every stalk is broken. It will never do to bend such stiff growths in that way!”

But when the shower was over, the soldier saw the little lad hurry over to the lilies and raise them up. To his utter astonishment, the boy straightened the stiff stalks without the least difficulty. It was apparent that not one of them was either broken or bruised. He ran from flower to flower, and soon all the rescued lilies shone in their full splendor in the meadow.

When the soldier saw this, he was seized with a singular rage. “What a queer child!” thought he. “It is incredible that he can undertake anything so idiotic. What kind of a man will he make, who cannot even bear to see a lily destroyed? How would it turn out if such a one had to go to war? What would he do if they ordered him to burn a house filled with women and children, or to sink a ship with all souls on board?”

Again he thought of the old prophecy, and he began to fear that the time had actually come for its fulfilment. “Since a child like this is here,” thought he, “perhaps this awful time is very close at hand. Already, peace prevails over the whole earth; and surely the day of war will nevermore dawn. From this time forth, all peoples will be of the same mind as this child: they will be afraid to injure one another, yea, they will not have the heart even to crush a bee or a flower! No great deeds will be done, no glorious battles won, and no brilliant triumvirate will march up to the Capitol. Nothing more will happen that a brave man could long for.”

And the soldier – who all the while hoped he would soon live through new wars and longed, through daring feats, to raise himself to power and riches – felt so exasperated with the little three-year-old that he raised his spear threateningly the next time the child ran past.

Another day it was neither the bees nor the lilies the little one sought to protect, but he undertook something which struck the soldier as being much more needless and thankless.

It was a fearfully hot day, and the sunrays fell upon the soldier's helmet and armor and heated them until he felt as if he wore a suit of fire. To the passers-by it looked as if he must suffer tortures from the heat. His bloodshot eyes were ready to burst from their sockets, and his lips were dry and shriveled. But as he was inured to the burning heat of African deserts, he thought this a mere trifle, and it didn't occur to him to move from his accustomed place. On the contrary, he took pleasure in showing the passers-by that he was so strong and hardy and did not need to seek shelter from the sun.

While he stood thus, and let himself be nearly broiled alive, the little boy who was wont to play in the meadow came suddenly up to him. He knew very well that the soldier was not one of his friends and so he was always careful not to come within reach of his spear; but now he ran up to him, and regarded him long and carefully; then he hurried as fast as he could towards the road. When he came back, he held both hands like a bowl, and carried in this way a few drops of water.

"Mayhap this infant has taken it upon himself to run and fetch water for me," thought the soldier. "He is certainly wanting in common sense. Should not a Roman soldier be able to stand a little heat! What need for that youngster to run around and help those who require no help! I don't want his compassion. I wish he and all like him were out of the world!"

The little one came walking very slowly. He held his fingers close together, so that nothing should be spilled or wasted. All the while, as he was nearing the soldier, he kept his eyes anxiously fixed upon the little water which he brought with him, and did not see that the man stood there frowning, with a forbidding look in his eye. Then the child came up to the soldier and offered him the water.

On the way his heavy blond curls had tumbled down over his forehead and eyes. He shook his head several times to get the hair out of his eyes, so that he could look up. When he succeeded at last, and became conscious of the hard expression on the soldier's face, he was not frightened, but stood still and begged him, with a bewitching smile, to taste of the water which he had brought with him. But the soldier felt no desire to accept a kindness from the child, whom he regarded as his enemy. He did not look down into his pretty face, but stood rigid and immovable, and showed no sign that he understood what the child wished to do for him.

Nor could the child understand that the man wished to repel him. He smiled all the while just as confidently, raised himself on the tips of his toes, and stretched his hands as high as he could that the big soldier might more easily get at the water.

The soldier felt so insulted because a mere child wished to help him that he gripped his spear to drive the little one away.

But just at that moment the extreme heat and sunshine beat down upon the soldier with such intensity that he saw red flames dance before his eyes and felt his brains melt within his head. He feared the sun would kill him, if he could not find instant relief.

Beside himself with terror at the danger hovering over him, the soldier threw his spear on the ground, seized the child with both hands, lifted him up, and absorbed as much as he could of the water which the little one held in his hands.

Only a few drops touched his tongue, but more was not needed. As soon as he had tasted of the water, a delicious coolness surged through his body, and he felt no more that the helmet and armor burnt and oppressed him. The sunrays had lost their deadly power. His dry lips became soft and moist again, and red flames no longer danced before his eyes.

Before he had time to realize all this, he had already put down the child, who ran back to the meadow to play. Astonished, the soldier began to say to himself: "What kind of water was this that the child gave me? It was a glorious drink! I must really show him my gratitude."

But inasmuch as he hated the little one, he soon dismissed this idea. "It is only a child," thought he, "and does not know why he acts in this way or that way. He plays only the play that pleases him best. Does he perhaps receive any gratitude from the bees or the lilies? On that youngster's account I need give myself no trouble. He doesn't even know that he has succored me."

The soldier felt, if possible, even more exasperated with the child a moment later, when he saw the commander of the Roman soldiers, who were encamped in Bethlehem, come out through the gate. "Just see what a risk I have run through that little one's rash behavior!" thought he. "If by chance Voltigius had come a moment earlier, he would have seen me standing with a child in my arms."

Meanwhile, the Commander walked straight up to the soldier and asked him if they might speak together there without danger of being overheard. He had a secret to impart to him. "If we move ten paces from the gate," replied the soldier, "no one can hear us."

"You know," said the Commander, "that King Herod, time and again, has tried to get possession of a child that is growing up here in Bethlehem. His soothsayers and priests have told him that this child shall ascend his throne. Moreover, they have predicted that the new King will inaugurate a thousand-year reign of peace and holiness. You understand, of course, that Herod would willingly make him – Harmless!"

"I understand!" said the soldier eagerly. "But that ought to be the easiest thing in the world."

"It would certainly be very easy," said the Commander, "if the King only knew which one of all the children here in Bethlehem is The One."

The soldier knit his brows. "It is a pity his soothsayers can not enlighten him about this," said he.

"But now Herod has hit upon a ruse, whereby he believes he can make the young Peace-Prince harmless," continued the Commander. "He promises a handsome gift to each and all who will help him."

"Whatsoever Voltigius commands shall be carried out, even without money or gifts," said the soldier.

"I thank you," replied the Commander. "Listen, now, to the King's plan! He intends to celebrate the birthday of his youngest son by arranging a festival, to which all male children in Bethlehem, who are between the ages of two and three years, shall be bidden, together with their mothers. And during this festival – " He checked himself suddenly, and laughed when he saw the look of disgust on the soldier's face.

"My friend," he continued, "you need not fear that Herod thinks of using us as child-nurses. Now bend your ear to my mouth, and I'll confide to you his design."

The Commander whispered long with the soldier, and when he had disclosed all, he said:

"I need hardly tell you that absolute silence is imperative, lest the whole undertaking miscarry."

"You know, Voltigius, that you can rely on me," said the soldier.

When the Commander had gone and the soldier once more stood alone at his post, he looked around for the child. The little one played all the while among the flowers, and the soldier caught himself thinking that the boy swayed above them as light and attractive as a butterfly.

Suddenly he began to laugh. "True," said he, "I shall not have to vex myself very long over this child. He shall be bidden to the feast of Herod this evening."

He remained at his post all that day, until the even was come, and it was time to close the city gate for the night.

When this was done, he wandered through narrow and dark streets, to a splendid palace which Herod owned in Bethlehem.

In the center of this immense palace was a large stone-paved court encircled by buildings, around which ran three open galleries, one above the other. The King had ordered that the festival for the Bethlehem children should be held on the uppermost of these galleries.

This gallery, by the King's express command, was transformed so that it looked like a covered walk in a beautiful flower-garden. The ceiling was hidden by creeping vines hung with thick clusters of luscious grapes, and alongside the walls, and against the pillars stood small pomegranate trees, laden with ripe fruit. The floors were strewn with rose-leaves, lying thick and soft like a carpet. And all along the balustrades, the cornices, the tables, and the low divans, ran garlands of lustrous white lilies.

Here and there in this flower garden stood great marble basins where glittering gold and silver fish played in the transparent water. Multi-colored birds from distant lands sat in the trees, and in a cage sat an old raven that chattered incessantly.

When the festival began children and mothers filed into the gallery. Immediately after they had entered the palace, the children were arrayed in white dresses with purple borders and were given wreaths of roses for their dark, curly heads. The women came in, regal, in their crimson and blue robes, and their white veils, which hung in long, loose folds from high-peaked head-dresses, adorned with gold coins and chains. Some carried their children mounted upon their shoulders; others led their sons by the hand; some, again, whose children were afraid or shy, had taken them up in their arms.

The women seated themselves on the floor of the gallery. As soon as they had taken their places, slaves came in and placed before them low tables, which they spread with the choicest of foods and wines – as befitting a King's feast – and all these happy mothers began to eat and drink, maintaining all the while that proud, graceful dignity, which is the greatest ornament of the Bethlehem women.

Along the farthest wall of the gallery, and almost hidden by flower-garlands and fruit trees, was stationed a double line of soldiers in full armor. They stood, perfectly immovable, as if they had no concern with that which went on around them. The women could not refrain from casting a questioning glance, now and then, at this troop of iron-clad men. "For what are they needed here?" they whispered. "Does Herod think we women do not know how to conduct ourselves? Does he believe it is necessary for so many soldiers to guard us?"

But others whispered that this was as it should be in a King's home. Herod himself never gave a banquet without having his house filled with soldiers. It was to honor them that the heavily armored warriors stood there on guard.

During the first few moments of the feast, the children felt timid and uncertain, and sat quietly beside their mothers. But soon they began to move about and take possession of all the good things which Herod offered them.

It was an enchanted land that the King had created for his little guests. When they wandered through the gallery, they found bee-hives whose honey they could pillage without the interference of a single crotchety bee. They found trees which, bending, lowered their fruit-laden branches down to them. In a corner they found magicians who, on the instant, conjured their pockets full of toys; and in another corner they discovered a wild-beast tamer who showed them a pair of tigers, so tame that they could ride them.

But in this paradise with all its joys there was nothing which so attracted the attention of these little ones as the long line of soldiers who stood immovable at the extreme end of the gallery. Their eyes were captivated by their shining helmets, their stern, haughty faces, and their short swords, which reposed in richly jeweled sheaths.

All the while, as they played and romped with one another, they thought continually about the soldiers. They still held themselves at a distance, but they longed to get near the men to see if they were alive and really could move themselves.

The play and festivities increased every moment, but the soldiers stood all the while immovable. It seemed incredible to the little ones that people could stand so near the clusters of grapes and all the other dainties, without reaching out a hand to take them.

Finally, there was one boy who couldn't restrain his curiosity any longer. Slowly, but prepared for hasty retreat, he approached one of the armored men; and when he remained just as rigid and motionless, the child came nearer and nearer. At last he was so close to him that he could touch his shoe latches and his shins.

Then – as though this had been an unheard-of crime – all at once these iron-men set themselves in motion. With indescribable fury they threw themselves upon the children, and seized them! Some swung them over their heads, like missiles, and flung them between lamps and garlands over the balustrade and down to the court, where they were killed the instant they struck the stone pavement.

Others drew their swords and pierced the children's hearts; others, again, crushed their heads against the walls before they threw them down into the dark courtyard.

The first moment after the onslaught, there was an ominous stillness. While the tiny bodies still swayed in the air, the women were petrified with amazement! But simultaneously all these unhappy mothers awoke to understand what had happened, and with one great cry they rushed toward the soldiers. There were still a few children left up in the gallery who had not been captured during the first attack. The soldiers pursued them and their mothers threw themselves in front of them and clutched with bare hands the naked swords, to avert the death-blow. Several women, whose children were already dead, threw themselves upon the soldiers, clutched them by the throat, and sought to avenge the death of their little ones by strangling their murderers.

During this wild confusion, while fearful shrieks rang through the palace, and the most inhuman death cruelties were being enacted, the soldier who was wont to stand on guard at the city gate stood motionless at the head of the stairs which led down from the gallery. He took no part in the strife and the murder: only against the women who had succeeded in snatching their children and tried to fly down the stairs with them did he lift his sword. And just the sight of him, where he stood, grim and inflexible, was so terrifying that the fleeing ones chose rather to cast themselves over the balustrade or turn back into the heat of the struggle, than risk the danger of crowding past him.

"Voltigius certainly did the right thing when he gave *me* this post," thought the soldier. "A young and thoughtless warrior would have left his place and rushed into the confusion. If I had let myself be tempted away from here, ten children at least would have escaped."

While he was thinking of this, a young woman, who had snatched up her child, came rushing towards him in hurried flight. None of the warriors whom she had to pass could stop her, because they were in the midst of the struggle with other women, and in this way she had reached the end of the gallery.

"Ah, there's one who is about to escape!" thought the soldier. "Neither she nor the child is wounded."

The woman came toward the soldier with such speed that she appeared to be flying, and he didn't have time to distinguish the features of either the woman or her child. He only pointed his sword at them, and the woman, with the child in her arms, dashed against it. He expected that the next second both she and the child would fall to the ground pierced through and through.

But just then the soldier heard an angry buzzing over his head, and the next instant he felt a sharp pain in one eye. It was so intense that he was stunned, bewildered, and the sword dropped from his hand. He raised his hand to his eye and caught hold of a bee, and understood that that which caused this awful suffering was only the sting of the tiny creature. Quick as a flash, he stooped down and picked up his sword, in the hope that as yet it was not too late to intercept the runaways.

But the little bee had done its work very well.

During the short time that the soldier was blinded, the young mother had succeeded in rushing past him and down the stairs; and although he hurried after her with all haste, he could not find her. She had vanished; and in all that great palace there was no one who could discover any trace of her.

The following morning, the soldier, together with several of his comrades, stood on guard, just within the city gate. The hour was early, and the city gates had only just been opened. But it appeared as though no one had expected that they would be opened that morning; for no throngs of field laborers streamed out of the city, as they usually did of a morning. All the Bethlehem inhabitants were so filled with terror over the night's bloodshed that no one dared to leave his home.

"By my sword!" said the soldier, as he stood and stared down the narrow street which led toward the gate, "I believe Voltigius has made a stupid blunder. It would have been better had he kept the gates closed and ordered a thorough search of every house in the city, until he had found the boy who managed to escape from the feast. Voltigius expects that his parents will try to get him away from

here as soon as they learn that the gates are open. I fear this is not a wise calculation. How easily they could conceal a child!”

He wondered if they would try to hide the child in a fruit basket or in some huge oil cask, or amongst the grain-bales of a caravan.

While he stood there on the watch for any attempt to deceive him in this way, he saw a man and a woman who came hurriedly down the street and were nearing the gate. They walked rapidly and cast anxious looks behind them, as though they were fleeing from some danger. The man held an ax in his hand with a firm grip, as if determined to fight should any one bar his way. But the soldier did not look at the man as much as he did at the woman. He thought that she was just as tall as the young mother who got away from him the night before. He observed also that she had thrown her skirt over her head. “Perhaps she wears it like this,” thought he, “to conceal the fact that she holds a child on her arm.”

The nearer they approached, the plainer he saw the child which the woman bore on her arm outlined under the raised robe. “I’m positive it is the one who got away last night. I didn’t see her face, but I recognize the tall figure. And here she comes now, with the child on her arm, and without even trying to keep it concealed. I had not dared to hope for such a lucky chance,” said the soldier to himself.

The man and woman continued their rapid pace all the way to the city gate. Evidently, they had not anticipated being intercepted here. They trembled with fright when the soldier leveled his spear at them, and barred their passage.

“Why do you refuse to let us go out in the fields to our work?” asked the man.

“You may go presently,” said the soldier, “but first I must see what your wife has hidden behind her robe.”

“What is there to see?” said the man. “It is only bread and wine, which we must live upon to-day.”

“You speak the truth, perchance,” said the soldier, “but if it is as you say, why does she turn away? Why does she not willingly let me see what she carries?”

“I do not wish that you shall see it,” said the man, “and I command you to let us pass!”

With this he raised his ax, but the woman laid her hand on his arm.

“Enter thou not into strife!” she pleaded. “I will try some other way. I shall let him see what I bear, and I know that he can not harm it.” With a proud and confident smile she turned toward the soldier, and threw back a fold of her robe.

Instantly the soldier staggered back and closed his eyes, as if dazed by a strong light. That which the woman held concealed under her robe reflected such a dazzling white light that at first he did not know what he saw.

“I thought you held a child on your arm,” he said.

“You see what I hold,” the woman answered.

Then the soldier finally saw that that which dazzled and shone was only a cluster of white lilies, the same kind that grew in the meadow; but their luster was much richer and more radiant. He could hardly bear to look at them.

He stuck his hand in among the flowers. He couldn’t help thinking that it must be a child the woman carried, but he felt only the cool flower-petals.

He was bitterly deceived, and in his wrath he would gladly have taken both the man and the woman prisoners, but he knew that he could give no reason for such a proceeding.

When the woman saw his confusion, she said: “Will you not let us go now?”

The soldier quietly lowered the spear and stepped aside.

The woman drew her robe over the flowers once more, and at the same time she looked with a sweet smile upon that which she bore on her arm. “I knew that you could not harm it, did you but see it,” she said to the soldier.

With this, they hastened away; and the soldier stood and stared after them as long as they were within sight.

While he followed them with his eyes, he almost felt sure that the woman did not carry on her arm a cluster of lilies, but an actual, living child.

While he still stood and stared after the wanderers, he heard loud shouts from the street. It was Voltigius, with several of his men, who came running.

“Stop them!” they cried. “Close the gates on them! Don’t let them escape!”

And when they came up to the soldier, they said that they had tracked the runaway boy. They had sought him in his home, but then he had escaped again. They had seen his parents hasten away with him. The father was a strong, gray-bearded man who carried an ax; the mother was a tall woman who held a child concealed under a raised robe.

The same moment that Voltigius related this, there came a Bedouin riding in through the gate on a good horse. Without a word, the soldier rushed up to the rider, jerked him down off the horse and threw him to the ground, and, with one bound, jumped into the saddle and dashed away toward the road.

Two days later, the soldier rode forward through the dreary mountain-desert, which is the whole southern part of Judea. All the while he was pursuing the three fugitives from Bethlehem, and he was beside himself because the fruitless hunt never came to an end.

“It looks, forsooth, as though these creatures had the power to sink into the earth,” he grumbled. “How many times during these days have I not been so close to them that I’ve been on the point of throwing my spear at the child, and yet they have escaped me! I begin to think that I shall never catch up with them.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

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