

Johnston Annie Fellows

Joel: A Boy of Galilee



Annie Johnston

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Annie Fellows Johnston

Joel: A Boy of Galilee

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

In this volume, it has been the purpose of the author to present to children, through "Joel," as accurate a picture of the times of the Christ as has been given to older readers through "Ben Hur." With this in view, the customs of the private and public life of the Jews, the temple service with its sacerdotal rites, and the minute observances of the numerous holidays have been studied so carefully that the descriptions have passed the test of the most critical inspection. An eminent rabbi pronounces them correct in every detail.

While the story is that of an ordinary boy, living among shepherds and fishermen, it touches at every point the gospel narrative, making Joel, in a natural and interesting way, a witness to the miracles, the death, and the resurrection of the Nazarene.

It was with the deepest reverence that the task was undertaken, and the fact that the little book is accomplishing its mission is evinced not only by the approval accorded its first editions by so many, from Bible students to bishops, but by the boys and girls here and in distant lands.

CHAPTER I

IT was market day in Capernaum. Country people were coming in from the little villages among the hills of Galilee, with fresh butter and eggs. Fishermen held out great strings of shining perch and carp, just dipped up from the lake beside the town. Vine-dressers piled their baskets with tempting grapes, and boys lazily brushed the flies from the dishes of wild honey, that they had gone into the country before day-break to find.

A ten-year-old girl pushed her way through the crowded market-place, carrying her baby brother in her arms, and scolding another child, who clung to her skirts.

"Hurry, you little snail!" she said to him. "There's a camel caravan just stopped by the custom-house. Make haste, if you want to see it!"

Their bare feet picked their way quickly over the stones, down to the hot sand of the lake shore. The children crept close to the shaggy camels, curious to see what they carried in their huge packs. But before they were made to kneel, so that the custom-house officials could examine the loads, the boy gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Look, Jerusha! Look!" he cried, tugging at her skirts. "What's that?"

Farther down the line, came several men carrying litters. On each one was a man badly wounded, judging by the many bandages that wrapped him.

Jerusha pushed ahead to hear what had happened. One of the drivers was telling a tax-gatherer.

"In that last rocky gorge after leaving Samaria," said the man, "we were set upon by robbers. They swarmed down the cliffs, and fought as fiercely as eagles. These men, who were going on ahead, had much gold with them. They lost it all, and might have been killed, if we had not come up behind in such numbers. That poor fellow there can hardly live, I think, he was beaten so badly."

The children edged up closer to the motionless form on the litter. It was badly bruised and blood-stained, and looked already lifeless.

"Let's go, Jerusha," whispered the boy, whimpering and pulling at her hand. "I don't like to look at him."

With the heavy baby still in her arms, and the other child tagging after, she started slowly back towards the market-place.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," she exclaimed. "Let's go up and get the other children, and play robbers. We never did do that before. It will be lots of fun."

There was a cry of welcome as Jerusha appeared again in the market-place, where a crowd of children were playing tag, regardless of the men and beasts they bumped against. They were all younger than herself, and did not resent her important air when she called, "Come here! I know a better game than that!"

She told them what she had just seen and heard down at the beach, and drew such a vivid picture of the attack, that the children were ready for anything she might propose.

"Now we'll choose sides," she said. "I'll be a rich merchant coming up from Jerusalem with my family and servants, and the rest of you can be robbers. We'll go along with our goods, and you pounce out on us as we go by. You may take the baby as a prisoner if you like," she added, with a mischievous grin. "I'm tired of carrying him."

A boy sitting near by on a door-step, jumped up eagerly. "Let me play, too, Jerusha!" he cried. "I'll be one of the robbers. I know just the best places to hide!"

The girl paused an instant in her choosing to say impatiently, although not meaning to be unkind, "Oh, no, Joel! We do not want you. You're too lame to run. You can't play with us!"

The bright, eager look died out of the boy's face, and an angry light shone in his eyes. He pressed his lips together hard, and sat down again on the step.

There was a patter of many bare feet as the children raced away. Their voices sounded fainter and fainter, till they were lost entirely in the noise of the busy street.

Usually, Joel found plenty to amuse and interest him here. He liked to watch the sleepy donkeys with their loads of fresh fruit and vegetables. He liked to listen to the men as they cried their wares, or chatted over the bargains with their customers. There was always something new to be seen in the stalls and booths. There was always something new to be heard in the scraps of conversation that came to him where he sat.

Down this street there sometimes came long caravans; for this was "the highway to the sea," – the road that led from Egypt to Syria. Strange, dusky faces sometimes passed this way; richly dressed merchant princes with their priceless stuffs from beyond the Nile; heavy loads of Babylonian carpets; pearls from Ceylon, and rich silks for the court of the wicked Herodias, in the town beyond. Fisherman and sailor, rabbi and busy workman passed in an endless procession.

Sometimes a Roman soldier from the garrison came by with ringing step and clanking sword. Then Joel would start up to look after the erect figure, with a longing gaze that told more plainly than words, his admiration of such strength and symmetry.

But this morning the crowd gave him a strange, lonely feeling, – a hungry longing for companionship.

Two half-grown boys passed by on their way to the lake, with fish nets slung over their shoulders. He knew the larger one, – a rough, kind-hearted fellow who had once taken him in his boat across the lake. He gave Joel a careless, good-natured nod as he passed. A moment after he felt a timid pull at the fish net he was carrying, and turned to see the little cripple's appealing face.

"Oh, Dan!" he cried eagerly. "Are you going out on the lake this morning? Could you take me with you?"

The boy hesitated. Whatever kindly answer he may have given, was rudely interrupted by his companion, whom Joel had never seen before.

"Oh, no!" he said roughly. "We don't want anybody limping along after us. You can't come, Jonah; you would bring us bad luck."

"My name isn't Jonah!" screamed the boy, angrily clinching his fists. "It's Joel!"

"Well, it is all the same," his tormentor called back, with a coarse laugh. "You're a Jonah, any way."

There were tears in the boy's eyes this time, as he dragged himself back again to the step.

"I hate everybody in the world!" he said in a hissing sort of whisper. "I hate'm! I hate'm!"

A stranger passing by turned for a second look at the little cripple's sensitive, refined face. A girlishly beautiful face it would have been, were it not for the heavy scowl that darkened it.

Joel pulled the ends of his head-dress round to hide his crooked back, and drew the loose robe he wore over his twisted leg.

Life seemed very bitter to him just then. He would gladly have changed places with the heavily laden donkey going by.

"I wish I were dead," he thought moodily. "Then I would not ache any more, and I could not hear when people call me names!"

Beside the door where he sat was a stand where tools and hardware were offered for sale. A man who had been standing there for some time, selecting nails from the boxes placed before him, and had heard all that passed, spoke to him.

"Joel, my lad, may I ask your help for a little while?" The friendly question seemed to change the whole atmosphere.

Joel drew his hands across his eyes to clear them of the blur of tears he was too proud to let fall, and then stood up respectfully. "Yes, Rabbi Phineas, what would you have me to do?"

The carpenter gathered up some strips of lumber in one hand, and his hammer and saws in the other.

"I have my hands too full to carry these nails," he answered. "If you could bring them for me, it would be a great service."

If the man had offered him pity, Joel would have fiercely resented it. His sensitive nature appreciated the unspoken sympathy, the fine tact that soothed his pride by asking a service of him, instead of seeking to render one.

He could not define the feeling, but he gratefully took up the bag of nails, and limped along beside his friend to the carpenter's house at the edge of the town. He had never been there before, although he met the man daily in the market-place, and long ago had learned to look forward to his pleasant greeting; it was so different from most people's. Somehow the morning always seemed brighter after he had met him.

The little whitewashed house stood in the shade of two great fig-trees near the beach. A cool breeze from the Galilee lifted the leaves, and swayed the vines growing around the low door.

Joel, tired by the long walk, was glad to throw himself on the grass in the shade. It was so still and quiet here, after the noise of the street he had just left.

An old hen clucked around the door-step with a brood of downy, yellow chickens. Doves cooed softly, somewhere out of sight. The carpenter's bench stood under one of the trees, with shavings and chips all around it. Two children were playing near it, building houses of the scattered blocks; one of them, a black-eyed, sturdy boy of five, kept on playing. The other, a little girl, not yet three, jumped up and followed her father into the house. Her curls gleamed like gold as she ran through the sunshine. She glanced at the stranger with deep-blue eyes so like her father's that Joel held out his hand.

"Come and tell me your name," he said coaxingly. But she only shook the curls all over her dimpled face, and hurried into the house.

"It's Ruth," said the boy, deigning to look up. "And mine is Jesse, and my mother's is Abigail, and my father's is Phineas, and my grandfather's is –"

How far back he would have gone in his genealogy, Joel could not guess; for just then his father came out with a cool, juicy melon, and Jesse hurried forward to get his share.

"How good it is!" sighed Joel, as the first refreshing mouthful slipped down his thirsty throat. "And how cool and pleasant it is out here. I did not know there was such a peaceful spot in all Capernaum."

"Didn't you always live here?" asked the inquisitive Jesse.

"No, I was born in Jerusalem. I was to have been a priest," he said sadly.

"Well, why didn't you be one then," persisted the child, with his mouth full of melon.

Joel glanced down at his twisted leg, and said nothing.

"Why?" repeated the boy.

Phineas, who had gone back to his work-bench, looked up kindly. "You ask too many questions, my son. No one can be a priest who is maimed or blemished in any way. Some sad accident must have befallen our little friend, and it may be painful for him to talk about it."

Jesse asked no more questions with his tongue; but his sharp, black eyes were fixed on Joel like two interrogation points.

"I do not mind telling about it," said Joel, sitting up straighter. "Once when I was not much older than you, just after my mother died, my father brought me up to this country from Jerusalem, to visit my Aunt Leah.

"I used to play down here by the lake, with my cousins, in the fishermen's boats. There was a boy that came to the beach sometimes, a great deal larger than I, – a dog of a Samaritan, – who pulled my hair and threw sand in my eyes. He was so much stronger than I, that I could not do anything to him but call him names. But early one morning he was swimming in the lake. I hid his clothes in the oleander bushes that fringe the water. Oh, but he was angry! I wanted him to be. But I had to keep away from the lake after that.

"One day some older children took me to the hills back of the town to gather almonds. This Rehum followed us. I had strayed away from the others a little distance, and was stooping to put the nuts in my basket, when he slipped up behind me. How he beat me! I screamed so that the other children came running back to me. When he saw them coming, he gave me a great push that sent me rolling over a rocky bank. It was not very high, but there were sharp stones below.

"They thought I was dead when they picked me up. It was months before I could walk at all; and I can never be any better than I am now. Just as my father was about to take me back to Jerusalem, he took a sudden fever, and died. So I was left, a poor helpless burden for my aunt to take care of. It has been six years since then."

Joel threw himself full length on the grass, and scowled up at the sky.

"Where is that boy that hurt you," asked Jesse.

"Rehum?" questioned Joel. "I wish I knew," he muttered fiercely. "Oh, how I hate him! I can never be a priest as my father intended. I can never serve in the beautiful temple with the white pillars and golden gates. I can never be like other people, but must drag along, deformed and full of pain as long as I live. And it's all his fault!"

A sudden gleam lit up the boy's eyes, as lightning darts through a storm-cloud.

"But I shall have my revenge!" he added, clenching his fists. "I cannot die till I have made him feel at least a tithe of what I have suffered. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!' That is the least that can satisfy me. Oh, you cannot know how I long for that time! Often I lie awake late into the night, planning my revenge. Then I forget how my back hurts and my leg pains; then I forget all the names I have been called, and the taunts that make my life a burden. But they all come back with the daylight; and I store them up and add them to his account. For everything he has made me suffer, I swear he shall pay for it four-fold in his own sufferings!"

Ruth shrank away, frightened by the wild, impassioned boy who sat up, angrily staring in front of him with eyes that saw nothing of the sweet, green-clad world around him. The face of his enemy blotted out all the sunny landscape. One murderous purpose filled him, mind and soul.

Nothing was said for a little while. The doves as before cooed of peace, and Phineas began a steady tap-tap with his hammer.

A pleasant-faced woman came out of the door with a water-jar on her head, and passed down the path to the public well. She gave Joel a friendly greeting in passing.

"Wait, mother!" lisped Ruth, as she ran after her. The woman turned to smile at the little one, and held out her hand. Her dress, of some soft, cotton material, hung in long flowing folds. It was a rich blue color, caught at the waist with a white girdle. The turban wound around her dark hair was white also, and so was the veil she pushed aside far enough to show a glimpse of brown eyes and red cheeks. She wore a broad silver bracelet on the bare arm which was raised to hold the water-jar, and the rings in her ears and talismans on her neck were of quaintly wrought silver.

"I did not know it was so late," said Joel, rising to his feet. "Time passes so fast here."

"Nay, do not go," said Phineas. "It is a long walk back to your home, and the sun is very hot. Stay and eat dinner with us."

Joel hesitated; but the invitation was repeated so cordially, that he let Jesse pull him down on the grass again.

"Now I'll tickle your lips with this blade of grass," said the child. "See how long you can keep from laughing."

When Abigail came back with the water, both the boys were laughing as heartily as if there had never been an ache or pain in the world. She smiled at them approvingly, as she led the way into the house.

Joel looked around with much curiosity. It was like most of the other houses of its kind in the town. There was only one large square room, in which the family cooked, ate, and slept; but on every side it showed that Phineas had left traces of his skilful hands.

There was a tiny window cut in one wall; most of the houses of this description had none, but depended on the doorway for light and air. Several shelves around the walls held the lamp and the earthenware dishes. The chest made to hold the rugs and cushions which they spread down at night to sleep on, was unusually large and ornamental. A broom, a handmill, and a bushel stood in one corner.

Near the door, a table which Phineas had made, stood spread for the mid-day meal.

There was broiled fish on one of the platters, beans and barley bread, a dish of honey, and a pitcher of milk. The fare was just the same that Joel was accustomed to in his uncle's house; but something made the simple meal seem like a banquet. It may have been that the long walk had made him hungrier than usual, or it may have been because he was treated as the honored guest, instead of a child tolerated through charity.

He watched his host carefully, as he poured the water over his hands before eating, and asked a blessing on the food.

"He does not keep the law as strictly as my Uncle Laban," was his inward comment. "He asked only one blessing, and Uncle Laban blesses every kind of food separately. But he must be a good man, even if he is not so strict a Pharisee as my uncle, for he is kinder than any one I ever knew before."

It was wonderful how much Joel had learned, in his eleven short years, of the Law. His aunt's husband had grown to manhood in Jerusalem, and, unlike the simple Galileans among whom he now lived, tried to observe its most detailed rules.

The child heard them discussed continually, till he felt he could neither eat, drink, nor dress, except by these set rules. He could not play like other children, and being so much with older people had made him thoughtful and observant.

He had learned to read very early; and hour after hour he spent in the house of Rabbi Amos, the most learned man of the town, poring over his rolls of scriptures. Think of a childhood without a picture, or a story-book! All that there was to read were these old records of Jewish history.

The old man had taken a fancy to him, finding him an appreciative listener and an apt pupil. So Joel was allowed to come whenever he pleased, and take out the yellow rolls of parchment from their velvet covers.

He was never perfectly happy except at these times, when he was reading these old histories of his country's greatness. How he enjoyed chasing the armies of the Philistines, and fighting over again the battles of Israel's kings! Many a tale he stored away in his busy brain to be repeated to the children gathered around the public fountain in the cool of the evening.

It mattered not what character he told them of, – priest or prophet, judge or king, – the picture was painted in life-like colors by this patriotic little hero-worshipper.

Here and at home he heard so many discussions about what was lawful and what was not, that he was constantly in fear of breaking one of the many rules, even in as simple a duty as washing a cup.

So he watched his host closely till the meal was over, finding that in the observance of many customs, he failed to measure up to his uncle's strict standard.

Phineas went back to his work after dinner. He was greatly interested in Joel, and, while he sawed and hammered, kept a watchful eye on him. He was surprised at the boy's knowledge. More than once he caught himself standing with an idle tool in hand, as he listened to some story that Joel was telling to Jesse.

After a while he laid down his work and leaned against the bench. "What do you find to do all day, my lad?" he asked, abruptly.

"Nothing," answered Joel, "after I have recited my lessons to Rabbi Amos."

"Does your aunt never give you any tasks to do at home?"

"No. I think she does not like to have me in her sight any more than she is obliged to. She is always kind to me, but she doesn't love me. She only pities me. I hate to be pitied. There is not a single one in the world who really loves me."

His lips quivered, but he winked back the tears. Phineas seemed lost in thought a few minutes; then he looked up. "You are a Levite," he said slowly, "so of course you could always be supported without needing to learn a trade. Still you would be a great deal happier, in my opinion, if you had something to keep you busy. If you like, I will teach you to be a carpenter. There are a great many things you might learn to make well, and, by and by, it would be a source of profit to you. There is no bread so bitter as the bread of dependence, as you may learn when you are older."

"Oh, Rabbi Phineas!" cried Joel. "Do you mean that I may come here every day? It is too good to be true!"

"Yes; if you will promise to stick to it until you have mastered the trade. If you are as quick to learn with your hands as you have been with your head, I shall have reason to be proud of such a pupil."

Joel's face flushed with pleasure, and he sprang up quickly, saying, "May I begin right now? Oh, I'll try *so* hard to please you!"

Phineas laid a soft pine board on the bench, and began to mark a line across it with a piece of red chalk.

"Well, you may see how straight a cut you can make through this plank."

He picked up a saw, and ran his fingers lightly along its sharp teeth. But he paused in the act of handing it to Joel, to ask, "You are sure, now, that your uncle and aunt will consent to such an arrangement?"

"Yes indeed!" was the emphatic answer. "They will be glad enough to have me out of the way, and learning something useful."

The saw cut slowly through the wood; for the weak little hand was a careful one, and the boy was determined not to swerve once from the line. He smiled with satisfaction as the pieces fell apart, showing a clean, straight edge.

"Well done!" said Phineas, kindly. "Now let me see you drive a nail." Made bold by his first success, Joel pounded away vigorously, but the hammer slipped more than once, and his unpractised fingers ached with the blows that he had aimed at the nail's head.

"You'll soon learn," said Phineas, with an encouraging pat on the boy's shoulder. "Gather up those odds and ends under the bench. When you've sawed them into equal lengths, I'll show you how to make a box."

Joel bent over his work with almost painful intensity. He fairly held his breath, as he made the measurements. He gripped the saw as if his life depended on the strength of his hold. Phineas smiled at his earnestness.

"Be careful, my lad," he said. "You will soon wear out at that rate."

It seemed to Joel that there never had been such a short afternoon. He had stopped to rest several times, when Phineas had insisted upon it; but this new work had all the fascination of an interesting game. The trees threw giant shadows across the grass, when he finally laid his tools aside. His back ached with so much unusual exercise, and he was very tired.

"Rabbi Phineas," he asked gently, after a long pause, "what makes you so good to me? What makes you so different from other people? While I am with you, I feel like I want to be good. Other people seem to rub me the wrong way, and make me cross and hateful; then I feel like I'd rather be wicked than not. Why this afternoon, I've scarcely thought of Rehum at all. I forgot at times that I am lame. When you talk to me, I feel like I did that day Dan took me out on the lake. It seemed a different kind of a world, – all blue sky and smooth water. I felt if I could stay out there all the time, where it was so quiet and comforting, that I could not even hate Rehum as much as I do."

A surprised, pleased look passed over the man's face. "Do I really make you feel that way, little one? Then I am indeed glad. Once when I was a young boy living in Nazareth, I had a playmate who had that influence over me and all the boys he played with. I never could be selfish and impatient when he was with me. His very presence rebuked such thoughts, – when we were children playing together, like my own two little ones there, and when we were older grown, working at the same

bench. It has been many a long year since I left Nazareth, but I think of him daily. Even now, after our long separation, the thought of his blameless life inspires me to a higher living. Yes," he went on musingly, more to himself than the boy, "it was like music. Surely no white-robed priest in the holy temple ever offered up more acceptable praise than the perfect harmony of his daily life."

Joel's lips trembled. "If I had ever had one real friend to care for me – not just pity me, you know – maybe I would have been different. But I have never had a single one since my father died."

Phineas smiled, and held out his hand. "You have one now, my lad, never forget that."

The strong brown hand closed in a warm grasp, and Joel drew it, with a grateful impulse, to his lips. Ruth came up with wondering eyes. She could not understand what had passed; but Joel's eyes were full of tears, and she vaguely felt that he needed comfort. She had a pet pigeon in her arms, that she carried everywhere with her.

"Here," she lisped, holding out the snowy winged bird. "Boy, take it! Boy, keep it!"

Joel looked up inquiringly at Phineas. "Take it," he said, in a low tone. "Let it be the omen of a happier life commencing for you."

"I never had a pet of any kind before," said Joel, in delight, smoothing the white wings folded contentedly against his breast. "But she loves it so, I dislike to take it from her. How beautiful it is!"

"My little Ruth is a born comforter," said Phineas, tossing her up in his arms. "Shall Joel take the pigeon home with him, little daughter?"

"Yes," she answered, nodding her head. "Boy cried."

"I'll name it 'Little Friend,'" said Joel, rising with it in his arms. "I'll take it home with me, and keep it until after the Sabbath, to make me feel sure that this day has not been just a dream; but I will bring it back next time I come. I can see it here every day, and it will be happier here. Oh, Rabbi Phineas, I can never thank you enough for this day!"

It was a pitiful little figure that limped away homeward in the fading light, with the white pigeon in his arms.

Looking anxiously up in the sky, Joel saw one star come twinkling out. The Sabbath would soon begin, and then he must not be found carrying even so much as this one poor little pigeon. The slightest burden would be unlawful.

As he hurried on, the loud blast of a trumpet, blown from the roof of the synagogue, signalled the laborers in the fields to stop all work. He knew that very soon it would sound again, to call the town people from their tasks; and at the third blast, the Sabbath lamp would be lighted in every home.

Fearful of his uncle's displeasure at his tardiness, he hurried painfully onward, to provide food and a resting-place for his "little friend" before the second sounding of the trumpet.

CHAPTER II

EARLY in the morning after the Sabbath, Joel was in his accustomed place in the market, waiting for his friend Phineas. His uncle had given a gruff assent, when he timidly asked his approval of the plan.

The good Rabbi Amos was much pleased when he heard of the arrangement. "Thou hast been a faithful student," he said, kindly. "Thou knowest already more of the Law than many of thy elders. Now it will do thee good to learn the handicraft of Phineas. Remember, my son, 'the balm was created by God before the wound.' Work, that is as old as Eden, has been given us that we might forget the afflictions of this life that fleeth like a shadow. May the God of thy fathers give thee peace!"

With the old man's benediction repeating itself like a solemn refrain in all his thoughts, Joel stood smoothing the pigeon in his arms, until Phineas had made his daily purchases. Then they walked on together in the cool of the morning, to the little white house under the fig-trees. Phineas was surprised at his pupil's progress. To be sure, the weak arms could lift little, the slender hands could attempt no large tasks. But the painstaking care he bestowed on everything he attempted, resulted in beautifully finished work. If there was an extra smooth polish to be put on some wood, or a delicate piece of joining to do, Joel's deft fingers seemed exactly suited to the task.

Before the winter was over, he had made many pretty little articles of furniture for Abigail's use.

"May I have these pieces of fine wood to use as I please?" he asked of Phineas, one day.

"All but that largest strip," he answered. "What are you going to make?"

"Something for Ruth's birthday. She will be three years old in a few weeks, Jesse says, and I want to make something for her to play with."

"What are you going to make her?" inquired Jesse, from under the work-bench. "Let me see too."

"Oh, I didn't know you were anywhere near," answered Joel, with a start of alarm.

"Tell me!" begged Jesse.

"Well, if you will promise to keep her out of the way while I am finishing it, and never say a word about it – "

"I'll promise," said the child, solemnly. He had to clap his hand over his mouth a great many times in the next few weeks, to keep his secret from telling itself, and he watched admiringly while Joel carved and polished and cut.

One of the neighbors had come in to talk with Abigail the day he finished it, and as the children were down on the beach, playing in the sand, he took it in the house to show to the women. It was a little table set with toy dishes, that he had carved out of wood, – plates and cups and platters, all complete.

The visitor held up her hands with an exclamation of delight. After taking up each little highly polished dish to admire it separately, she said, "I know where you might get a great deal of money for such work. There is a rich Roman living near the garrison, who spends money like a lord. No price is too great for him to pay for anything that pleases his fancy. Why don't you take some up there, and offer them for sale?"

"I believe I will," said Joel, after considering the matter. "I'll go just as soon as I can get them made."

Ruth spread many a little feast under the fig-trees; but after the first birthday banquet, Jesse was her only guest. Joel was too busy making more dishes and another little table, to partake of them.

The whole family were interested in his success. The day he went up to the great house near the garrison to offer them for sale, they waited anxiously for his return.

"He's sold them! He's sold them!" cried Jesse, hopping from one foot to the other, as he saw Joel coming down the street empty-handed. Joel was hobbling along as fast as he could, his face beaming.

"See how much money!" he cried, as he opened his hand to show a shining coin, stamped with the head of Cæsar. "And I have an order for two more. I'll soon have a fortune! The children liked the dishes so much, although they had the most beautiful toys I ever saw. They had images they called dolls. Some of them had white-kid faces, and were dressed as richly as queens. I wish Ruth had one."

"The law forbids!" exclaimed Phineas. "Have you forgotten that it is written, 'Thou shalt not make any likeness of anything in the heavens above or the earth beneath, or the waters under the earth'? She is happy with what she has, and needs no strange idols of the heathen to play with."

Joel made no answer; but he thought of the merry group of Roman children seated around the little table he had made, and wished again that Ruth had one of those gorgeously dressed dolls.

Skill and strength were not all he gained by his winter's work; for some of the broad charity that made continual summer in the heart of Phineas crept into his own embittered nature. He grew less suspicious of those around him, and smiles came more easily now to his face than scowls.

But the strong ambition of his life never left him for an instant. To all the rest of the world he might be a friend; to Rehum he could only be the most unforgiving of enemies.

The thought that had given him most pleasure when the wealthy Roman had tossed him his first earnings, was not that his work could bring him money, but that the money could open the way for his revenge.

That thought, like a dark undercurrent, gained depth and force as the days went by. As he saw how much he could do in spite of his lameness, he thought of how much more he might have accomplished, if he had been like other boys. It was a constant spur to his desire for revenge.

One day Phineas laid aside his tools much earlier than usual, and without any explanation to his wondering pupil, went up into the town.

When he returned, he nodded to his wife, who sat in the doorway spinning, and who had looked up inquiringly as he approached.

"Yes, it's all arranged," he said to her. Then he turned to Joel to ask, "Did you ever ride on a camel, my boy?"

"No, Rabbi," answered the boy, in surprise, wondering what was coming next.

"Well, I have a day's journey to make to the hills in Upper Galilee. A camel caravan passes near the place where my business calls me, as it goes to Damascus. I seek to accompany it for protection. I go on foot, but I have made arrangements for you to ride one of the camels."

"Oh, am I really to go, too?" gasped Joel, in delighted astonishment. "Oh, Rabbi Phineas! How did you ever think of asking me?"

"You have not seemed entirely well, of late," was the answer. "I thought the change would do you good. I said nothing about it before, for I had no opportunity to see your uncle until this afternoon; and I did not want to disappoint you, in case he refused his permission."

"And he really says I may go?" demanded the boy, eagerly.

"Yes, the caravan moves in the morning, and we will go with it."

There was little more work done that day. Joel was so full of anticipations of his journey that he scarcely knew what he was doing. Phineas was busy with preparations for the comfort of his little family during his absence, and went into town again.

On his return he seemed strangely excited. Abigail, seeing something was amiss, watched him carefully, but asked no questions. He took a piece of timber that had been laid away for some especial purpose, and began sawing it into small bits.

"Rabbi Phineas," ventured Joel, respectfully, "is that not the wood you charged me to save so carefully?"

Phineas gave a start as he saw what he had done, and threw down his saw.

"Truly," he said, smiling, "I am beside myself with the news I have heard. I just now walked ten cubits past my own house, unknowing where I was, so deeply was I thinking upon it. Abigail," he asked, "do you remember my friend in Nazareth whom I so often speak of, – the son of Joseph

the carpenter? Last week he was bidden to a marriage in Cana. It happened, before the feasting was over, the supply of wine was exhausted, and the mortified host knew not what to do. Six great jars of stone had been placed in the room, to supply the guests with water for washing. *He changed that water into wine!*"

"I cannot believe it!" answered Abigail, simply.

"But Ezra ben Jared told me so. He was there, and drank of the wine," insisted Phineas.

"He could not have done it," said Abigail, "unless he were helped by the evil one, or unless he were a prophet. He is too good a man to ask help of the powers of darkness; and it is beyond belief that a son of Joseph should be a prophet."

To this Phineas made no answer. His quiet thoughts were shaken out of their usual routine as violently as if by an earthquake.

Joel thought more of the journey than he did of the miracle. It seemed to the impatient boy that the next day never would dawn. Many times in the night he wakened to hear the distant crowing of cocks. At last, by straining his eyes he could distinguish the green leaves of the vine on the lattice from the blue of the half-opened blossoms. By that token he knew it was near enough the morning for him to commence saying his first prayers.

Dressing noiselessly, so as not to disturb the sleeping family, he slipped out of the house and down to the well outside the city-gate. Here he washed, and then ate the little lunch he had wrapped up the night before. A meagre little breakfast, – only a hard-boiled egg, a bit of fish, and some black bread. But the early hour and his excitement took away his appetite for even that little.

Soon all was confusion around the well, as the noisy drivers gathered to water their camels, and make their preparations for the start.

Joel shrunk away timidly to the edge of the crowd, fearful that his friend Phineas had overslept himself.

In a few minutes he saw him coming with a staff in one hand, and a small bundle swinging from the other.

Joel had one breathless moment of suspense as he was helped on to the back of the kneeling camel; one desperate clutch at the saddle as the huge animal plunged about and rose to its feet. Then he looked down at Phineas, and smiled blissfully.

Oh, the delight of that slow easy motion! The joy of being carried along without pain or effort! Who could realize how much it meant to the little fellow whose halting steps had so long been taken in weariness and suffering?

Swinging along in the cool air, so far above the foot-passengers, it seemed to him that he looked down upon a new earth. Blackbirds flew along the roads, startled by their passing. High overhead, a lark had not yet finished her morning song. Lambs bleated in the pastures, and the lowing of herds sounded on every hill-side.

Not a sight or sound escaped the boy; and all the morning he rode on without speaking, not a care in his heart, not a cloud on his horizon.

At noon they stopped in a little grove of olive-trees where a cool spring gurgled out from the rocks.

Phineas spread out their lunch at a little distance from the others; and they ate it quickly, with appetites sharpened by the morning's travel. Afterwards Joel stretched himself out on the ground to rest, and was asleep almost as soon as his eyelids could shut out the noontide glare of the sun from his tired eyes.

When he awoke, nearly an hour afterward, he heard voices near him in earnest conversation. Raising himself on his elbow, he saw Phineas at a little distance, talking to an old man who had ridden one of the foremost camels.

They must have been talking of the miracle, for the old man, as he stroked his long white beard, was saying, "But men are more wont to be astonished at the sun's eclipse, than at his daily rising. Look, my friend!"

He pointed to a wild grape-vine clinging to a tree near by. "Do you see those bunches of half-grown grapes? There is a constant miracle. Day by day, the water of the dew and rain is being changed into the wine of the grape. Soil and sunshine are turning into fragrant juices. Yet you feel no astonishment."

"No," assented Phineas; "for it is by the hand of God it is done."

"Why may not this be also?" said the old man. "Even this miracle at the marriage feast in Cana?"

Phineas started violently. "What!" he cried. "Do you think it possible that this friend of mine is the One to be sent of God?"

"Is not this the accepted time for the coming of Israel's Messiah?" answered the old man, solemnly. "Is it not meet that he should herald his presence by miracles and signs and wonders?"

Joel lay down again to think over what he had just heard. Like every other Israelite in the whole world, he knew that a deliverer had been promised his people.

Time and again he had read the prophecies that foretold the coming of a king through the royal line of David; time and again he had pictured to himself the mighty battles to take place between his down-trodden race and the haughty hordes of Cæsar. Sometime, somewhere, a universal dominion awaited them. He firmly believed that the day was near at hand; but not even in his wildest dreams had he ever dared to hope that it might come in his own lifetime.

He raised himself on his elbow again, for the old man was speaking.

"About thirty years ago," he said slowly, "I went up to Jerusalem to be registered for taxation, for the emperor's decree had gone forth and no one could escape enrolment. You are too young to remember the taking of that census, my friend; but you have doubtless heard of it."

"Yes," assented Phineas, respectfully.

"I was standing just outside the Joppa gate, bargaining with a man for a cage of gold finches he had for sale, which I wished to take to my daughter, when we heard some one speaking to us. Looking up we saw several strange men on camels, who were inquiring their way. They were richly dressed. The trappings and silver bells on their camels, as well as their own attire, spoke of wealth. Their faces showed that they were wise and learned men from far countries.

"We greeted them respectfully, but could not speak for astonishment when we heard their question:

"'Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.' The bird-seller looked at me, and I looked at him in open-mouthed wonder. The men rode on before we could find words wherewith to answer them.

"All sorts of rumors were afloat, and everywhere we went next day, throughout Jerusalem, knots of people stood talking of the mysterious men, and their strange question. Even the king was interested, and sought audience with them."

"Could any one answer them?" asked Phineas.

"Nay! but it was then impressed on me so surely that the Christ was born, that I have asked myself all these thirty years, 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews?' For I too would fain follow on to find and worship him. As soon as I return from Damascus, I shall go at once to Cana, and search for this miracle-worker."

The old man's earnest words made a wonderful impression on Joel. All the afternoon, as they rose higher among the hills, the thought took stronger possession of him. He might yet live, helpless little cripple as he was, to see the dawn of Israel's deliverance, and a son of David once more on its throne.

Ride on, little pilgrim, happy in thy day-dreams! The time is coming; but weary ways and hopeless heart-aches lie between thee and that to-morrow. The king is on his way to his coronation, but it will be with thorns.

Ride on, little pilgrim, be happy whilst thou can!

CHAPTER III

IT was nearly the close of the day when the long caravan halted, and tents were pitched for the night near a little brook that came splashing down from a cold mountain-spring.

Joel, exhausted by the long day's travel, crowded so full of new experiences, was glad to stretch his cramped limbs on a blanket that Phineas took from the camel's back.

Here, through half-shut eyes, he watched the building of the camp-fire, and the preparations for the evening meal.

"I wonder what Uncle Laban would do if he were here!" he said to Phineas, with an amused smile. "Look at those dirty drivers with their unwashed hands and unblessed food. How little regard they have for the Law. Uncle Laban would fast a lifetime rather than taste anything that had even been passed over a fire of their building. I can imagine I see him now, gathering up his skirts and walking on the tips of his sandals for fear of being touched by anything unclean."

"Your Uncle Laban is a good man," answered Phineas, "one careful not to transgress the Law."

"Yes," said the boy. "But I like your way better. You keep the fasts, and repeat the prayers, and love God and your neighbors. Uncle Laban is careful to do the first two things; I am not so sure about the others. Life is too short to be always washing one's hands."

Phineas looked at the little fellow sharply. How shrewd and old he seemed for one of his years! Such independence of thought was unusual in a child trained as he had been. He scarcely knew how to answer him, so he turned his attention to spreading out the fruits and bread he had brought for their supper.

Next morning, after the caravan had gone on without them, they started up a narrow bridle-path, that led through hillside-pastures where flocks of sheep and goats were feeding.

The dew was still on the grass, and the air was so fresh and sweet in this higher altitude that Joel walked on with a feeling of strength and vigor unknown to him before.

"Oh, look!" he cried, clasping his hands in delight, as a sudden turn brought them to the upper course of the brook whose waters, falling far below, had refreshed them the night before.

The poetry of the Psalms came as naturally to the lips of this beauty-loving little Israelite as the breath he drew.

Now he repeated, in a low, reverent voice, "'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.' Oh, Rabbi Phineas, did you ever know before that there could be such green pastures and still waters?"

The man smiled at the boy's radiant, upturned face. "'Yea, the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof,'" he murmured. "We have indeed a goodly heritage."

Hushed into silence by the voice of the hills and the beauty on every side, they walked on till the road turned again.

Just ahead stood a house unusually large for a country district; everything about it bore an air of wealth and comfort.

"Our journey is at an end now," said Phineas. "Yonder lies the house of Nathan ben Obed. He owns all those flocks and herds we have seen in passing this last half hour. It is with him that I have business; and we will tarry with him until after the Sabbath."

They were evidently expected, for a servant came running out to meet them. He opened the gate and conducted them into a shaded court-yard. Here another servant took off their dusty sandals, and gave them water to wash their feet.

They had barely finished, when an old man appeared in the doorway; his long beard and hair were white as the abba he wore.

Phineas would have bowed himself to the ground before him, but the old man prevented it, by hurrying to take both hands in his, and kiss him on each cheek.

"Peace be to thee, thou son of my good friend Jesse!" he said. "Thou art indeed most welcome."

Joel lagged behind. He was always sensitive about meeting strangers; but the man's cordial welcome soon put him at his ease.

He was left to himself a great deal during the few days following. The business on which the old man had summoned Phineas required long consultations.

One day they rode away together to some outlying pastures, and were gone until night-fall. Joel did not miss them. He was spending long happy hours in the country sunshine. There was something to entertain him, every way he turned. For a while he amused himself by sitting in the door and poring over a roll of parchment that Sarah, the wife of Nathan ben Obed, brought him to read.

She was an old woman, but one would have found it hard to think so, had he seen how briskly she went about her duties of caring for such a large household.

After Joel had read for some little time, he became aware that some one was singing outside, in a whining, monotonous way, and he laid down his book to listen. The voice was not loud, but so penetrating he could not shut it out, and fix his mind on his story again. So he rolled up the parchment and laid it on the chest from which it had been taken; then winding his handkerchief around his head, turban fashion, he limped out in the direction of the voice.

Just around the corner of the house, under a great oak-tree, a woman sat churning. From three smooth poles joined at the top to form a tripod, a goat-skin bag hung by long leather straps. This was filled with cream; she was slapping it violently back and forth in time to her weird song.

Her feet were bare, and she wore only a coarse cotton dress. But a gay red handkerchief covered her black hair, and heavy copper rings hung from her nose and ears.

The song stopped suddenly as she saw Joel. Then recognizing her master's guest, she smiled at him so broadly that he could see her pretty white teeth.

Joel hardly knew what to say at this unexpected encounter, but bethought himself to ask the way to the sheep-folds and the watch-tower. "It is a long way there," said the woman, doubtfully; Joel flushed as he felt her black eyes scanning his misshapen form.

Just then Sarah appeared in the door, and the maid repeated the question to her mistress.

"To be sure," she said. "You must go out and see our shepherds with their flocks. We have a great many employed just now, on all the surrounding hills. Rhoda, call your son, and bid him bring hither the donkey that he always drives to market."

The woman left her churning, and presently came back with a boy about Joel's age, leading a donkey with only one ear.

Joel knew what that meant. At some time in its life the poor beast had strayed into some neighbor's field, and the owner of the field had been at liberty to cut off an ear in punishment.

The boy that led him wore a long shirt of rough hair-cloth. His feet and legs were brown and tanned. A shock of reddish sunburned hair was the only covering for his head. There was a squint in one eye, and his face was freckled.

He made an awkward obeisance to his mistress.

"Buz," she said, "this young lad is your master's guest. Take him out and show him the flocks and herds, and the sheep-folds. He has never seen anything of shepherd life, so be careful to do his pleasure. Stay!" she added to Joel. "You will not have time to visit them all before the mid-day meal, so I will give you a lunch, and you can enjoy an entire day in the fields."

As the two boys started down the hill, Joel stole a glance at his companion. "What a stupid-looking fellow!" he thought; "I doubt if he knows anything more than this sleepy beast I am riding. I wonder if he enjoys any of this beautiful world around him. How glad I am that I am not in his place."

Buz, trudging along in the dust, glanced at the little cripple on the donkey's back with an inward shiver.

"What a dreadful lot his must be," he thought. "How glad I am that I am not like he is!"

It was not very long till the shyness began to wear off, and Joel found that the stupid shepherd lad had a very busy brain under his shock of tangled hair. His eyes might squint, but they knew just

where to look in the bushes for the little hedge-sparrow's nest. They could take unerring aim, too, when he sent the smooth sling-stones whizzing from the sling he carried.

"How far can you shoot with it?" asked Joel.

For answer Buz looked all around for some object on which to try his skill; then he pointed to a hawk slowly circling overhead. Joel watched him fit a smooth pebble into his sling; he had no thought that the boy could touch it at such a distance. The stone whizzed through the air like a bullet, and the bird dropped several yards ahead of them.

"See!" said Buz, as he ran to pick it up, and display it proudly. "I struck it in the head."

Joel looked at him with increasing respect. "That must have been the kind of sling that King David killed the giant with," he said, handing it back after a careful examination.

"King David!" repeated Buz, dully, "seems to me I have heard of him, sometime or other; but I don't know about the giant."

"Why where have you been all your life?" cried Joel, in amazement. "I thought everybody knew about that. Did you never go to a synagogue?"

Buz shook his bushy head. "They don't have synagogues in these parts. The master calls us in and reads to us on the Sabbath; but I always get sleepy when I sit right still, and so I generally get behind somebody and go to sleep. The shepherds talk to each other a good deal about such things, I am never with them though. I spend all my time running errands."

Shocked at such ignorance, Joel began to tell the shepherd king's life with such eloquence that Buz stopped short in the road to listen.

Seeing this the donkey stood still also, wagged its one ear, and went to sleep. But Buz listened, wider awake than he had ever been before in his life.

The story was a favorite one with Joel, and he put his whole soul into it.

"Who told you that?" asked Buz, taking a long breath when the interesting tale was finished.

"Why I read it myself!" answered Joel.

"Oh, can you read?" asked Buz, looking at Joel in much the same way that Joel had looked at him after he killed the hawk. "I do not see how anybody can. It puzzles me how people can look at all those crooked black marks and call them rivers and flocks and things. I looked one time, just where Master had been reading about a great battle. And I didn't see a single thing that looked like a warrior or a sword or a battle-axe, though he called them all by name. There were several little round marks that might have been meant for sling-stones; but it was more than I could make out, how he could get any sense out of it."

Joel leaned back and laughed till the hills rang, laughed till the tears stood in his eyes, and the donkey waked up and ambled on.

Buz did not seem to be in the least disturbed by his merriment, although he was puzzled as to its cause. He only stooped to pick up more stones for his sling as they went on.

It was not long till they came to some of the men, – great brawny fellows dressed in skins, with coarse matted hair and tanned faces. How little they knew of what was going on in the busy world outside their fields! As Joel talked to them he found that Cæsar's conquests and Hero's murders had only come to them as vague rumors. All the petty wars and political turmoils were unknown to them. They could talk to him only of their flocks and their faith, both as simple as their lives.

Joel, in his wisdom learned of the Rabbis, felt himself infinitely their superior, child though he was. But he enjoyed his day spent with them. He and Buz ate the ample lunch they had brought, dipped up water from the brook in cups they made of oak-leaves, and both finally fell asleep to the droning music of the shepherd's pipes, played softly on the uplands.

A distant rumble of thunder aroused them, late in the afternoon; and they started up to find the shepherds calling in their flocks. The gaunt sheep dogs raced to and fro, bringing the straying goats together. The shepherds brought the sheep into line with well-aimed sling-shots, touching them first on one side, and then on the other, as oxen are guided by the touch of the goad.

Joel looked up at the darkening sky with alarm. "Who would have thought of a storm on such a day!" he exclaimed.

Buz cocked his eyes at the horizon. "I thought it might come to this," he said; "for as we came along this morning there were no spider-webs on the grass; the ants had not uncovered the doors of their hills; and all the signs pointed to wet weather. I thought though, that the time of the latter rains had passed a week ago. I am always glad when the stormy season is over. This one is going to be a hard one."

"What shall we do?" asked Joel.

Buz scratched his head. Then he looked at Joel. "You never could get home on that trifling donkey before it overtakes us; and they'll be worried about you. I'd best take you up to the sheep-fold. You can stay all night there, very comfortably. I'll run home and tell them where you are, and come back for you in the morning."

Joel hesitated, appalled at spending the night among such dirty men; but the heavy boom of thunder, steadily rolling nearer, silenced his half-spoken objection. By the time the donkey had carried him up the hillside to the stone-walled enclosure round the watch-tower, the shepherds were at the gates with their flocks.

Joel watched them go through the narrow passage, one by one. Each man kept count of his own sheep, and drove them under the rough sheds put up for their protection.

A good-sized hut was built against the hillside, where the shepherds might find refuge. Buz pointed it out to Joel; then he turned the donkey into one of the sheds, and started homeward on the run.

Joel shuddered as a blinding flash of lightning was followed by a crash of thunder that shook the hut. The wind bore down through the trees like some savage spirit, shrieking and moaning as it flew. Joel heard a shout, and looked out to the opposite hillside. Buz was flying along in break-neck race with the storm. At that rate he would soon be home. How he seemed to enjoy the race, as his strong limbs carried him lightly as a bird soars!

At the top he turned to look back and laugh and wave his arms, – a sinewy little figure standing out in bold relief against a brazen sky.

Joel watched till he was out of sight. Then, as the wind swooped down from the mountains, great drops of rain began to splash through the leaves.

The men crowded into the hut. One of them started forward to close the door, but stopped suddenly, with his brown hairy hand uplifted.

"Hark ye!" he exclaimed.

Joel heard only the shivering of the wind in the tree-tops; but the man's trained ear caught the bleating of a stray lamb, far off and very faint.

"I was afraid I was mistaken in my count; they jostled through the gate so fast I could not be sure." Going to a row of pegs along the wall, he took down a lantern hanging there and lit it; then wrapping his coat of skins more closely around him, and calling one of the dogs, he set out into the gathering darkness.

Joel watched the fitful gleam of the lantern, flickering on unsteadily as a will-o'-the-wisp. A moment later he heard the man's deep voice calling tenderly to the lost animal; then the storm struck with such fury that they had to stand with their backs against the door of the hut to keep it closed.

Flash after flash of lightning blinded them. The wind roared down the mountain and beat against the house till Joel held his breath in terror. It was midnight before it stopped. Joel thought of the poor shepherd out on the hills, and shuddered. Even the men seemed uneasy about him, as hour after hour passed, and he did not come.

Finally he fell asleep in the corner, on a pile of woolly skins. In the gray dawn he was awakened by a great shout. He got up, and went to the door. There stood the shepherd. His bare limbs were cut by stones and torn by thorns. Blood streamed from his forehead where he had been wounded

by a falling branch. The mud on his rough garments showed how often he had slipped and fallen on the steep paths.

Joel noticed, with a thrill of sympathy, how painfully he limped. But there on the bowed shoulders was the lamb he had wandered so far to find; and as the welcoming shout arose again, Joel's weak little cheer joined gladly in.

"How brave and strong he is," thought the boy. "He risked his life for just one pitiful little lamb."

The child's heart went strangely out to this rough fellow who stood holding the shivering animal, sublimely unconscious that he had done anything more than a simple duty.

Joel, who felt uncommonly hungry after his supperless night, thought he would mount the donkey and start back alone. But just as he was about to do so, a familiar bushy head showed itself in the door of the sheepfold. Buz had brought him some wheat-cakes and cheese to eat on the way back.

Joel was so busy with this welcome meal that he did not talk much. Buz kept eying him in silence, as if he longed to ask some question. At last, when the cheese had entirely disappeared, he found courage to ask it.

"Were you always like that?" he said abruptly, motioning to Joel's back and leg. Somehow the reference did not wound him as it generally did. He began to tell Buz about the Samaritan boy who had crippled him. He never was able to tell the story of his wrongs without growing passionately angry. He had worked himself into a white heat by the time he had finished.

"I'd get even with him," said Buz, excitedly, with a wicked squint of his eyes.

"How would you do it?" demanded Joel. "Cripple him as he did me?"

"Worse than that!" exclaimed Buz, stopping to take deliberate aim at a leaf overhead, and shooting a hole exactly through the centre with his sling. "I'd blind him as quick as that! It's a great deal worse to be blind than lame."

Joel closed his eyes, and rode on a few moments in darkness. Then he opened them and gave a quick glad look around the landscape. "My! What if I never could have opened them again," he thought. "Yes, Buz, you're right," he said aloud. "It *is* worse to be blind; so I shall take Rehum's eyesight also, some time. Oh, if that time were only here!"

Although the subject of the miracle at Cana had been constantly in the mind of Phineas, and often near his lips, he did not speak of it to his host until the evening before his departure.

It was just at the close of the evening meal. Nathan ben Obed rose half-way from his seat in astonishment, then sank back.

"How old a man is this friend of yours?" he asked.

"About thirty, I think," answered Phineas. "He is a little younger than I."

"Where was he born?"

"In Bethlehem, I have heard it said, though his home has always been in Nazareth."

"Strange, strange!" muttered the man, stroking his long white beard thoughtfully.

Joel reached over and touched Phineas on the arm. "Will you not tell Rabbi Nathan about the wonderful star that was seen at that time?" he asked, in a low tone.

"What was that?" asked the old man, arousing from his reverie.

When Phineas had repeated his conversation with the stranger on the day of his journey, Nathan ben Obed exchanged meaning glances with his wife.

"Send for the old shepherd Heber," he said. "I would have speech with him."

Rhoda came in to light the lamps. He bade her roll a cushioned couch that was in one corner to the centre of the room.

"This old shepherd Heber was born in Bethlehem," he said; "but since his sons and grandsons have been in my employ, he has come north to live. He used to help keep the flocks that belonged to the Temple, and that were used for sacrifices. His has always been one of the purest of lives; and I have never known such faith as he has. He is over a hundred years old, so must have been quite aged at the time of the event of which he will tell us."

Presently an old, old man tottered into the room, leaning on the shoulders of his two stalwart grandsons. They placed him gently on the cushions of the couch, and then went into the court-yard to await his readiness to return. Like the men Joel had seen the day before, they were dressed in skins, and were wild-looking and rough. But this aged father, with dim eyes and trembling wrinkled hands, sat before them like some hoary patriarch, in a fine linen mantle.

Pleased as a child, he saluted his new audience, and began to tell them his only story.

As the years had gone by, one by one the lights of memory had gone out in darkness. Well-known scenes had grown dim; old faces were forgotten; names he knew as well as his own, could not be recalled: but this one story was as fresh and real to him, as on the night he learned it.

The words he chose were simple, the voice was tremulous with weakness; but he spoke with a dramatic fervor that made Joel creep nearer and nearer, until he knelt, unknowing, at the old man's knee, spell-bound by the wonderful tale.

"We were keeping watch in the fields by night," began the old shepherd, "I and my sons and my brethren. It was still and cold, and we spoke but little to each other. Suddenly over all the hills and plains shone a great light, – brighter than light of moon or stars or sunshine. It was so heavenly white we knew it must be the glory of the Lord we looked upon and we were sore afraid, and hid our faces, falling to the ground. And, lo! an angel overhead spake to us from out of the midst of the glory, saying, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good-will toward men!'

"Oh, the sound of the rejoicing that filled that upper air! Ever since in my heart have I carried that foretaste of heaven!"

The old shepherd paused, with such a light on his upturned face that he seemed to his awestruck listeners to be hearing again that same angelic chorus, – the chorus that rang down from the watch-towers of heaven, across earth's lowly sheep-fold, on that first Christmas night.

There was a solemn hush. Then he said, "And when they were gone away, and the light and the song were no more with us, we spake one to another, and rose in haste and went to Bethlehem. And we found the Babe lying in a manger with Mary its mother; and we fell down and worshipped Him.

"Thirty years has it been since the birth of Israel's Messiah; and I sit and wonder all the day, – wonder when He will appear once more to His people. Surely the time must be well nigh here when He may claim His kingdom. O Lord, let not Thy servant depart until these eyes that beheld the Child shall have seen the King in His beauty!"

Joel remained kneeling beside old Heber, perfectly motionless. He was fitting together the links that he had lately found. A child, heralded by angels, proclaimed by a star worshipped by the Magi! A man changing water into wine at only a word!

"I shall yet see Him!" exclaimed the voice of old Heber, with such sublime assurance of faith that it found a response in every heart.

There was another solemn stillness, so deep that the soft fluttering of a night-moth around the lamp startled them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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