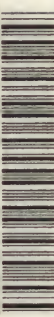


UNIVERSITY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE



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THE LILY OF
ISRAEL







THE LILY OF ISRAEL

THE LIFE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN

By THE ABBÉ GERBET

REVISED EDITION

WITH A FOREWORD BY
REV. WILLIAM LIVINGSTON



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FOREWORD

IN the golden days of happy childhood we all loved to read that sweet story of Our Lady's life called *The Lily of Israel*. The gentle narrative of holy souls was so entrancing and the sacred scenes so bathed in the colors of romance that our hearts were captivated and our souls filled with spiritual gladness.

Alas! when in riper years we turned once more the dear old pages, something was wanting—something seemed amiss. The story was still interesting, still fascinating, but again and again we found ourselves sad at heart. Now it was the strange use of a word; then it was the unhappy turn of a phrase; again it was some marvelous incident related with a certain glowing enthusiasm which carried its writer beyond the confines of credibility, when there was no apparent reason either for invention or rhapsody.

As a natural consequence many lovers of Our Lady have been longing for just such a work as the publishers here present to us, possessing all the charm of the old version while retaining nothing that might make the judicious grieve. The writer of this new version has performed a difficult task with

that sureness of touch which comes from long literary experience and with that refinement of sympathy which betokens the labor of love. The greatest care has been taken to correct some errors in geographical situations and bring the whole narrative of events into strict conformity with Biblical facts. Texts of Scripture, which in the old version were translated directly from the French, are here given in the more familiar words of our own Bible, and the whole work, while adhering as closely as possible to the original, is presented in a new dress, worthy of the advance which has been made in Catholic literature during the last twenty years. Hence it is now a real prose poem that can be read and enjoyed by young and old alike, with never a fear that any page will cause the most critical to wish it had been written in a vein of less imaginative fervor.

The Abbé Gerbet's delicate flowers of fancy, however, have not all been cast away. There was no need for such ruthless destruction. Where his imaginative passages apparently served no very useful purpose and where expressions, however spiritually refined, gave forth no perfume of true devotion, they have been gently but firmly laid aside. But where his happy thoughts could be justly considered as permissible accompaniments and artistic adornments for a proper setting of essential truths, they have been lovingly retained. And this is as it should be.

Some of the saints were called upon to perform heroic deeds that were seen by all men, and attracted even unsympathetic hearts to express some sort of admiration, however grudgingly given. But the extraordinary virtues of other holy souls were so hidden away from the eyes of the world that even our feeblest effort to show them forth in words must needs call the language of imagination to its aid. All artists are born, not made. Genius is a gift of God and should find its noblest expression in making known the love, the wisdom and the omnipotence of our Father in heaven, whether they be manifested in the wondrous beauty of simple nature, the spiritual loveliness of human souls, or the heroic greatness of human deeds. The lives of God's chosen ones, therefore, should not be mere prosy statements of bald facts. Truth as presented by a matter-of-fact delver into dusty records is useful and necessary in its proper place. Truth as presented by an artist is still truth, absolute and unstained, but illuminated, glorified and indued with new power to warm the affections, strengthen the will and inspire the mind of man.

Such was the noble purpose which inspired the Abbé Gerbet to compose *The Lily of Israel* and such was the holy purpose which prompted the preparation of this appealingly beautiful new version. May it meet with a warm welcome from all true lovers of our blessed Lady, and may it enkindle in the hearts of all readers a warmer, sweeter and deeper

love for our divine Lord, His immaculate Virgin
Mother and His saintly foster-father here on earth.

WILLIAM LIVINGSTON.

ST. GABRIEL'S RECTORY, NEW YORK.

September 21st, 1916.

THE LILY OF ISRAEL



THE LILY OF ISRAEL

PRELUDE

“Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army
set in array? . . . The daughters saw her and called
her most blessed, the queens . . . praised her.”¹

Greeting

Accompanied by a legion of heavenly companions the
Archangel Gabriel alights upon the earth, whose angel
hastens to salute him.

Angel of Earth

Messenger of happiness, what news dost thou bring
from thy country?

Angel of Heaven

Brethren, I bring joyous news! Rejoice, O Earth,
and clothe thyself in all thy splendor! Adorn thyself
with flowers, and fruit of gold, and verdure green!
Let the sun pour forth upon thee his beautiful rays, the

¹ Cant. vi, 8, 9.

night her sparkling dew. Ye rivers, flow more joyously; ye torrents, bound with rapture; ye mountains, glow with happiness; ye stars, look down upon the earth!

The Day of joy, of hope, of satisfaction; the time of redemption is at hand! Mary (at that name, Angel of Earth, bow down thy head) Mary, the holy Virgin, opens her eyes to the light! O Light, rejoice! Caress her with thy rays, this creature fairer than the morning star! Wind, blow softly, that all nature may be mild at this, her dawning!

Angel of Earth

Thy words be blest, great Messenger of Peace! Blest be this wonderful Virgin, whose advent thou dost proclaim! And oh, my companions, guardians of souls, who, since the Fall of the human race, have desired to watch and suffer with mankind, expecting their deliverance, rejoice with me! Salute the spotless Virgin, whose rising star announces a life that shall never end!

Chorus of Guardian Angels

O Mary, Star of the sea! The Angels of Heaven and Earth salute thee! O Mary, thou flower of fields celestial, which shall bring forth the mysterious lily of the valley. Through thee the fate of humankind is changed, its crime repaired.² A new Eve, more beautiful, more glorious than the first, thou wilt shed new life upon the earth. O Mary, Star of the sea! The Angels of Heaven and Earth salute thee!

² St. Aug. Serm., xviii.

Angel of Heaven

Eve wept for sorrow. Mary hath already leaped for joy. Eve bore within her breast the fruit of tears, Mary hath within her breast the fruit of joy eternal. The one brought forth a sinner to the world. The other will bring into it Him who shall redeem the world from sin. The mother of the human race plunged her children into pain and death. But Mary comes, bearing in her hands the gift of eternal life! Eve is the source of sin; Mary is the spring of grace.

Angel of Earth

Blest, oh blest forevermore the one who comes to crush the serpent's head, to restore mankind to joy! Blest be the earth which holds such happiness!

Chorus of Angels

Blest be the earth, which holds such happiness! Let us approach this holy one! Let us watch beside her. Let us trace her holy footsteps from the cradle to the grave! Blest be Mary, blest forevermore!

Thus do the angels chant the praises of their Queen. Thus does the earth resound with joy, and send forth to the heavens its acclamations. The stars sing together; the spheres are a-thrill with joyous harmony; the celestial messengers shed light and perfume along the paths of men!

CHAPTER I

AT NAZARETH

HIDDEN away among the hills of Galilee, in a small hamlet called Nazareth, there lived, over two thousand years ago, an elderly couple named Anne and Joachim.

Though devout and God-fearing, they had experienced many vicissitudes. Good fortune was more stranger than friend to them. Storms destroyed their harvests, and their carefully-tended vines repaid them scantily for their time and labor. They were poor, indeed.

But when men and women love God they do not fear the evils of this world. Anne and Joachim never lamented over their poverty. They had a keener grief by far—the keenest that could befall people of their race: they were childless.

Anne, perhaps, felt the deprivation most. It was a time when all Israel thrilled with expectancy of the Messiah who had been promised to God's chosen nation. According to the old Jewish Law, Joachim would have been permitted to take another wife, but Anne was far too dear to him. In her youth he

had loved her for her surpassing beauty, and during the years of their wedded life he had found this loveliness of feature equaled only by her loveliness of soul. So it was that no word of repining ever passed his lips—either over their lack of children, or their poverty. For the Lord, he told himself, had given him a noble-hearted woman, a true wife, a helpmate—and for the rest “if we have received good things at the hand of God why should we not receive evil?”¹ adding, “Who can oppose Him, and be at peace?”

So their days were chiefly given to toil, to prayer, and to good deeds, and their sorrow lessened as the years went by. It was God’s will, and they bowed to His wise decrees.

But the Almighty Creator could not look unmoved on such complete submission. Perhaps He had but tested them; perhaps their meekness pleased Him; perhaps He had wished to prepare them through years of waiting for the splendid joy that was still to be theirs. Anne, fearful and doubting, at first would not believe. Then she could not, dared not. Rather, she tried to persuade herself that she was mistaken, that such a thing was impossible, since she was already old.

One day—her mind filled with doubts and conjectures and misgivings for which she could find no words—she and Joachim were seated in the garden

¹ Job ii, 10.

close to their little home. The heavy shade of an ancient sycamore tree protected them from the rays of the sun. Husband and wife were both busy sorting seed for the sowing time, Anne blowing the chaff from each little kernel and putting the seeds in her tunic. They had thus been engaged for over an hour. It was very quiet and still; all nature seemed drowsy. There was no sound save that of their own voices and these were only to be heard occasionally.

Suddenly, to Joachim's astonishment, his wife rose to her feet.

There was a wondering expression on her face, a light of sudden joy. Her tunic escaped from her clasp, and raising her hands toward heaven, she sank upon her knees, and lifted her countenance, which seemed to glow anew with the beauty of her youth.

"My God, I thank Thee! My God, I bless Thee!" she whispered. "All praise and joy be Thine. Thou hast heard the prayers and pleadings of Thy servants!" And then she turned toward Joachim. "Rejoice with me, my husband," she said, the tears streaming down her cheeks, "for God has at last deigned to pour out His benedictions upon this household."

In this way did Joachim learn of the unexpected blessing which had been bestowed upon them. He joined with Anne in prayer, his soul praising the Most High.

Soon other signs of heavenly favor surprised him and excited his admiration. In every place Anne

visited it seemed as if joy and hope and peace attended her. She carried with her a secret blessing. It had been her habit always to visit the sick. Now, when she entered a sick-room the one who was ill forgot his woes, or felt that they were relieved. She had been accustomed to go to those in any way afflicted. When she approached them now their anguish was alleviated; peace and submission to God's will followed, so that their trouble seemed lighter at once, and easier to bear. If dissension arose among her neighbors and Anne went to settle their differences, her voice fell like oil on troubled waters, and enemies became friends.

The wife of Joachim had ever been a modest, gentle, simple woman, content to do what good she could, though never possessing, ere this, so strange and wonderful a gift of peace and propitiation. No one marveled at it more than she. She could but conclude that some hidden source of virtue was at work within her. Joachim, too, felt that Anne had changed in some unaccountable manner.

"Undoubtedly it is due to her new happiness," he thought at first. But it appeared odd that personal happiness could so speedily assuage the sorrows and afflictions of others. He began to consider her carefully. It seemed as if all this emanated from some strong and holy influence.

"What is happening, Anne?" he asked her one day a few weeks later, in the privacy of their own little dwelling. "The more I observe, the less I

understand. Can you account for these strange things?"

And he told her all that had been noted by him for some time past.

Both remained silent when he finished. Anne's eyes were cast down, her hands lying quietly in her lap. At last, lifting her head, she gazed into Joachim's face.

"Do you remember these words, Joachim, my husband? 'Give praise, O thou barren, that bearest not; sing forth praise, and make a joyful noise, thou that didst not—'"² She hesitated.

"What is your meaning, Anne?" demanded Joachim.

"The time is approaching," she said, in a hushed, reverent tone. "And, as you frequently say to me, the world is in expectation. The weeks predicted by Daniel are hastening to their close. The people of God, relying upon His promises, raise their eyes to heaven . . . listening . . . hoping . . ." Her voice trembled. "Does not our faith say to us, 'A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a scepter shall spring up from Israel. Out of Jacob shall He come that shall rule?'"³

Joachim continued to gaze steadily at his wife.

"You are of the race of Jacob; you are the descendant of Jacob through your grandfather, Nathan."

Again she paused, and her heart began to beat

² Isaias liv, 1.

³ Numb. xxiv, 17, 19.

violently, yet she took courage to conclude in a low voice: "If it should be!"

But Joachim's face was stern.

"Anne, you have not rightly considered the words of the prophecy. If you had, you would know they cannot apply to us." He took up a scroll from a bench near him, and turning it over, found at last the place he sought. "Here you may read: 'Many are the children of the desolate, more than of the married wife, saith the Lord.'" ⁴ He laid the scroll aside, and went on gently, "Do not let us suffer pride to enter our hearts. What have we done to merit the honor of the Most High?"

Anne was silent, her humble soul reproaching her.

Nevertheless, miracles continued. Together they read the prophecies, meditated upon them, and could not understand. Much mysterious meaning escaped them. Even Joachim was at a loss. He did not know what to think. The time of harvest arrived, and singular to relate, their granaries were full, their cellars overflowing. In all their lives they had never possessed such an abundance of this world's goods.

Is it surprising that Anne should meditate on these things; should ponder over what had gone before, and what was now occurring? Her lips were silent, but deep in her heart of hearts lived a hope which she would not, dared not, express! She hoped for a

⁴ Isaias liv, 1.

son—the honor and glory to which every woman in Israel aspired. A son! Why should not this child be a son, whose coming had been preceded by such honor, such wonderful manifestations of power?

* * * * *

In the beginning of the seventh month of the sacred year of the Hebrews—the month of Tisri, which we call September, that child so eagerly expected came into the world. The faint cries of the new-born babe fell on Anne's ears and overwhelmed her soul with joy.

“Let me see its face,” she pleaded. But the women did not hasten to comply. There was no loud rejoicing, such as occurred when a male child was born into the world. No one came near her. She closed her eyes, and a tear stole silently down her cheek.

And now, in answer to a summons, Joachim entered the room. In a low, quiet voice he ordered the women away. Then taking the child in his arms, he brought it to its mother.

“Anne,” he said, “let the will of God be accomplished. Let us submit. Our child is—a daughter.”

In spite of himself his voice trembled. In spite of his resignation a tear rolled down his cheek. His hopes had reached a pinnacle from which his innate humility could not detach him—he, too, had desired a son with all his heart and soul. And a son preceded by such signs and wonders, surely—

Anne took the baby in her arms, but as the tiny form rested upon her bosom her heart leaped. Her face seemed to shine with a happiness so wonderful that again Joachim stood amazed before her.

"A daughter!" she whispered. "A daughter! Ah, yes, but what a daughter! She shall rise in the midst of her people, and shall be blessed above all those who are blessed by God—for she shall open the doors of the East, and the Desired of nations shall appear!"

Her voice seemed to penetrate the uttermost depths of Joachim's heart.

"Behold thou art fair, O my love, behold thou art fair, thy eyes are those of doves.⁵ Thou perfumest my dwelling as storax, and galbanum and aloes. Thou shalt be the mother of fair love and of fear and of knowledge and of holy hope.⁶ Oh, what profusion of celestial gifts is spread over thee! The angels bend before this temple of modesty and innocence—a temple their Maker has Himself prepared! Listen! Can you not hear their sublime alleluias, the rustling of their golden wings?"

Joachim started, and fell upon his knees beside the couch, for indeed at that moment he, too, heard a strain of sweetest music, so entrancing that it could not be of earth.

"Let not the others overhear us!" he exclaimed, prudently and humbly. "Let us keep the secrets

⁵ Cant. i, 14

⁶ Ecclus. xxiv, 21, 24.

of the Most High, dear Anne, until it shall please Him to reveal them."

And with trembling hand he blessed his well-beloved daughter, who was to shed such happiness and glory upon his old age. Bowing down, he saluted her as the forerunner of a new era.

And then, the women returning, Anne and Joachim were silent. Nor did they allow a hint of their great joy to escape during the congratulations that followed from the neighbors, relatives and acquaintances who hastened to tender their good wishes.

When the day arrived to give a name to the little daughter Anne called her Mary.

"Mary means exalted," she said to Joachim, "and she shall be exalted like a cedar in Libanus and as a cypress tree on Mount Sion."⁷

Alas, poor mother! She forgot that this name also signifies woe. Yet both these meanings were in the decrees of God. For if the Queen of angels should at a future period be exalted to the highest in the heavens it would not be until she had removed all woes from the earth.

Ah, name of Mary! So precious to the ear, so dear to the heart! Mary, Queen of angels! Mary, Mother of God! Mary, star of the sea! Mary, Comforter of the afflicted! Pity, have pity on all those who suffer! Pray for them, and may thy name, O Mary, be ever exalted!

Blessed be thy name, Mary!

⁷ Ecclus. xxiv, 17.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY LIFE OF MARY

MARY, who had, even before her birth, been the harbinger of such peace and joy, continued to bestow happiness on those who approached her. She was the delight of all, as well as of her father and mother—gentle, mild, beautiful, seeming to glow with heavenly warmth and sweetest perfume. Even strangers—few as they were—coming near her, felt a wondrously strange exaltation of the heart, felt every ugly passion dissipated, felt their thoughts turning, almost magically, to the God of heaven and earth. Her face was delicately oval; her eyes a large and lustrous azure; her hair a warm reddish chestnut. The predominant beauty was, of course, her expression, which was so mild and pure that people lingered near her to watch her, or to hear her talk.

Though but a child, she did not resemble other children. Those clear eyes were filled with something else besides the wonder of infancy; something deep and profound and serious. Anne, at whose knee she stood, imbibing precious lessons from Holy Writ; Joachim, who held her in his arms while he

read from the sacred scrolls, felt this depth of understanding, which was so unusual, and yet, from Mary, not altogether unexpected. If she gathered flowers in the fields, if she dipped her fingers into the rippling waters of the brook, if she watched the clouds that drifted across a heaven as blue as her own beautiful eyes, if she fed and cared for a tiny fledgling fallen too soon from its nest, she seemed to be reading wonders in nature's book that were too deep for words. Trained by such pious parents, and endowed with a marvelous inner knowledge, Mary frequently knelt and returned thanks to the great Creator, a Being so magnificent even in the smallest of His works.

She was wonderfully, innocently happy. Then came the first faint shade of thought and sorrow. One day, her hands filled with radiant blossoms, she was walking slowly toward the fields when she saw, seated at the roadside, a little companion, who was now weeping bitterly. Instantly Mary's heart was filled with tenderness.

"What is the matter? Why do you weep?" she questioned.

"My mother is dead," said the child, between her sobs.

"Dead?" Mary, the cherished daughter of Anne and Joachim, had never seen death. The words of the child troubled her, and though she put her arms about her and consoled her as only Mary could, she

did not continue on her way, but, when she had dried the falling tears, went back to her own house and her mother. She began to question. Anne told her anew of the Fall of Adam and Eve—and of their punishment, which the human race had inherited. The child Mary turned pale and trembled, realizing the meaning of pain and death and sorrow, of labor and fruitless toil and poverty!

And then Anne went on to relate the wonderful promise which had been made—the promise of a Redeemer, the hour of whose coming, according to all the prophecies, was even now approaching.

“How good God is! How good God is!” Mary exclaimed, clasping her hands in a transport of joy.

Anne looked at her lovingly. What happiness to be near her! Then came a feeling of sadness. How unworthy she and Joachim were to possess such a treasure! And later, when recounting this experience to her spouse, her hands trembled.

“It would not surprise me if she were taken from us,” she said, in broken accents. Joachim looked at her strangely, but did not reply. “Her manner is almost angelic—whenever I approach her I feel such awe and respect—” And her eyes were suffused with tears.

With great tenderness Joachim pressed her hand, though he did not utter a word, and instead of going back to his work he went into the inner room, where, falling on his knees, he prayed, returning thanks to God. For Mary was so plainly marked by the

divine favor that he could only ask to be enlightened as to the Lord's will concerning her. It was just as Anne said. No ordinary child could be so like a child descended from heaven. She did not seem of earth, but, rather, walked "in the way of justice, in the midst of the paths of judgment,"¹ and her whole time was spent in pleasing her parents and in singing praises to God, the while her busy fingers assisted in all the details of housekeeping within her strength.

One day, while thus employed, she chanted a little canticle in honor of the Most High. Joachim overheard. He listened, much moved, and drew to one side, with head bent upon his breast. At once Anne became alarmed, for the slightest shade of uneasiness shown by her beloved spouse affected her also.

"What is the matter, my dear husband?" she asked.

"Anne," said Joachim, "a certain idea has long been with me, and now I must put it into words. This child, whose advent occasioned us such happiness, this child, who was given to us almost at the close of our lives, has only been lent to us by the Lord. She is His. We must restore her to Him."

Anne turned pale.

"She must be consecrated to the Temple," went on Joachim, vainly endeavoring to strengthen his tones.

¹ Prov, viii. 20.

Anne clasped her hands tightly.

"Alas!" she said. "I knew! Every day I feared that you would say this, and every night thanked God that the time was not yet. I even ventured to hope that the Lord would call me to Himself before manifesting His will by your lips. But oh, Joachim, have you thought what will become of us when we have lost this precious jewel, our delight and our glory?"

Mary's voice was silent in the room adjoining. She was on her knees, they knew, and Anne, fearing that the sobs she could not restrain would be overheard by her child and distress her, drew her veil over her head and went to the open doorway. Seating herself, she gave way to her tears. Joachim followed, leaning against one of the posts, and looking at his wife sorrowfully, but not attempting comfort, for he knew the grief of her heart. Presently the child Mary, coming from her devotions, noticed the sadness of her father's countenance. Her mother's sobbing, too, reached her ears.

"Mother, dearest mother!" exclaimed Mary, going to her. "Why are you weeping? What has befallen?"

"Naught," returned her mother, gently putting her veil from her face. "But I sorrow over what is to come."

Mary tenderly wiped the tears from her cheek, and kissed her.

"What do you tell me always? Shall I repeat the

words?" She put her arms about her. "'We are sent upon earth joyfully to accomplish the will of God.' Oh, mother, is not this your word? And yours, father?" She turned to comfort Joachim now, who could not endure the sight of his beloved child and her sorrowing mother.

The last rays of the setting sun had departed from the summit of Carmel, and the majestic shadow of the mountain extended through the valley, concealing the beauty of the twilight. Just so had grief cast its shadow over their hearts, eclipsing all their joy. Mary took Joachim's hand, her other hand clasping that of her mother. Drawing both closer together, she laid her forehead upon them as a token of respect.

And Anne explained to the child Mary the cause of her own trouble and the affliction of Joachim. Mary listened. Then falling upon her knees, she pointed to the heavens.

"Mother! Father!" she exclaimed. "God, who has put this thought into your hearts, will give you strength to endure the pain it brings."

Before her serene, untroubled gaze Anne's heart seemed relieved of its heavy burden. She wiped away her tears, murmuring: "Rather should I not rejoice at being the mother of such a child? Ought I not to submit without repining to the sacrifice demanded of me?"

With her hand in Mary's she prayed silently. Joachim knelt, and with his arm about his beloved child, prayed also. The sun, as if loath to depart

without shedding a gleam of light on this holy scene, touched the summit of Mount Carmel with a spear of glory. It was almost like an omen of the blessing of God.

A few days later Anne and Joachim set out for Jerusalem, taking Mary with them.

* * * * *

Their relatives and neighbors wished to accompany them, for without knowing the lofty destiny of Mary, her consecration to the service of the Temple reflected an honor on the family of which they were very proud. The rainy season had commenced, which meant that the journey would be tedious and uncomfortable, and the roads difficult.

The travelers, mounted on strong horses, proceeded like a caravan, skirting first the base of a lofty hill, covered with broad-leaved fig-trees, dark mastics, and yellow-hued pomegranates. A forest of verdant oak served to shelter them from the rain, for the sun, gleaming brightly when they left Nazareth, had long been hidden. The horizon was dark with heavy clouds, and in the plain the rain was falling, gleaming like silver as it descended. At this point the valley of Nazareth is enclosed by mountains, and Mount Carmel, whose rugged peak forms, on the left, a strong and lofty wall. Brooks had become torrents, and these torrents had overflowed their banks. The River Cison had swelled and inundated the country—just as it had done long years before when Sisara

and his troops were defeated. The roads were deluged. It was necessary to take a roundabout course, and then proceed by rough and difficult paths. But when they began to descend, they found—as happened frequently in this climate—warm and gentle breezes prevailing, and all the fragrant odors of spring. The Great Sea, the Mediterranean, flowed in solemn beauty below, and the horizon was aflame with gold and scarlet and silver.

“Oh!” exclaimed the child Mary. “If our Creator has made the earth so beautiful for us now, what must it have been before the Fall?”

And the thoughts of her heart soared to heaven. On these heights she seemed so much closer to Him.

The journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem is about eighty miles, and should, at most, have taken only four or five days, but it was fully a week before the travelers arrived in sight of the Holy City. They saluted it with a hymn of praise and the next day entered it by the Gate of Ephraim, going at once to the Temple.

Zachary, one of the priests of the course of Abia, a distant relative of Anne’s, was then performing the priestly duties. Neither Anne nor Joachim had sent him word of their approach, but as they entered the Temple he came out to meet and welcome them.

“I expected you,” he said, raising his hand in blessing. “A young messenger, beautiful as an angel of light, came before you, warning me of your arrival.”

This greatly startled Anne and Joachim. They exchanged glances—and though they did not reply they felt strengthened by the thought that they had fulfilled God's will in bringing their daughter to His service. Upon presenting a child to the Temple it was customary to offer a lamb or two small doves—the last offering that of the poor—the offering also of the daughter of Joachim and Anne. They were sacrificed upon the Altar of Propitiation, in the presence of all the relatives and neighbors of the young virgin.

While the incense was burning upon the Altar of Perfumes, Anne and Joachim clasped their daughter in their arms for the last time, and all who had accompanied her gave her the kiss of peace. Then the child, bidding them an affectionate farewell, entered under the gilded square before the porch of the holy Temple, to the service of whose God she had dedicated her youth.

Glittering with gold, shining brilliantly with light, the glorious Temple stood in all its magnificence. Distant music fell upon their ears as the doors opened and closed upon that slender childish form; a delightful odor seemed to float toward them. Both Anne and Joachim were silent. No tears now. They were filled with a sense of desolation. Yes, they had made the sacrifice. They had given their child to her Creator—to the One who had bestowed her upon them! Afterward they might have joy in this thought, but now, now—their human nature

gained the mastery. The earth was black and dark! What if the weather was serenely fair, the sun glittering above them, all the world smiling and peaceful? Their journey homeward was silent, tedious, mournful. Every step lagged, for they had left their hearts behind them, in the Holy City, in the Temple of the Lord!

Their friends did not intrude upon their anguish. They hastened as much as possible upon the homeward way, so that the father and mother could once more reach their abode and be alone to comfort each other, and to take up the burden of their daily lives without the fairest blossom that had, until that day, ever bloomed upon this earth. And when Anne and Joachim re-entered their lonely dwelling, now indeed a desert, they looked at each other in silence, their grief too deep for words.

If Mary had been an ordinary child, her absence would have been sufficient to plunge them into sorrow. But what must have been the loss of this gift of God, the happiness and pride of all her relatives as well as of her father and mother?

Perhaps we have experienced something like this in our own lives. Perhaps God's grace has descended upon us, illumining our hearts and souls, followed, as such rare moments are, by darkness and aridity. The pure and angelic Mary was like that ray of heavenly light; her departure left her parents plunged in gloom. She had been their radiant star.

How could they exist without her guidance?—without ever again beholding her?

Oh! If it could be our happy lot to entertain such a guest for a single day! Or to have lived for even one hour under the mild glance of the Queen of Angels! Nay, if our hearts could exist but one minute of time in her presence—could any pleasure on earth equal that pleasure? Yet Joachim and Anne had enjoyed this beautiful gift for several years. They had breathed the atmosphere of heaven, the atmosphere of innocence, peace, and purity. . . .

God had demanded her. They obeyed His will—but the trial was so great that He did not suffer them to bear it long. A very short time after the separation His kindness recalled them to Himself.

CHAPTER III

MARY'S LIFE IN THE TEMPLE

WHEN her parents died Mary had become more used to the life of the Temple, to the watching and praying at the entrance of the sanctuary, and to mingling her sweet voice with the thrilling tones of the virgins who, from the tops of the silver-latticed galleries, night and day sang the praises of God. More frequently, however, she meditated upon the holy Writings, whose prophetic words found echo in her heart.

There was no lack of youthful society. But though Mary joined with the others in the symbolical dances performed to the sound of harp or psaltery; though she embroidered the rich girdles of the Levites and the magnificent vestments of the High Priest with gold and precious stones, she seldom took part in the merry speeches of those about her. A faint smile greeted their talk of the future, their happy plannings. The beautiful Salome was making ready for her approaching wedding with becoming modesty. The more frivolous Anais dilated upon the bracelets and earrings of gold, the gorgeous garments which her rich affianced, Orpha, was ready

to bestow upon her. Mary heard them, doubtless, but was so lost in interior thoughts, so wrapped in meditation, that she paid but slight attention.

She did not see the young Levites draw aside with involuntary respect as she passed, nor did she know that she was ever regarded as a being set far above others.

“She is more precious than all riches, and all the things that are desired are not to be compared with her.”¹ “She hath opened her mouth to wisdom, and the law of clemency is on her tongue.”² “Many daughters have gathered together riches: thou hast surpassed them all.”³

When Mary finished her tasks, when she had interspersed the tunics with gold and jewels, for her hands were skillful, when she had performed all the duties of a virgin consecrated to the service of the Temple—just as she used to seek her mother’s side in the little house at Nazareth, she sought out Elizabeth, the gentle wife of Zachary, or Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, called the Prophetess, who had dwelt in God’s house all the days of her widowhood. At home the Holy Scriptures had been Mary’s study. They were her study now. She asked the explanation, the meaning of this phrase or that, and pondered on it. Both women, advanced in years as they were, could not help loving and admiring Mary. Her pure face was so full of earnest thought,

¹ Prov. iii, 15.

² Prov. xxxi, 26.

³ Ibid., 29.

she was so serious, so gentle, so wise beyond her years.

“And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”⁴ “The scepter shall not be taken away from Juda . . . till He come that is to be sent. And He shall be the expectation of nations.”⁵

She repeated the words, seated beside Anna, her thoughtful gaze fastened upon the wise woman’s face.

“The scepter *has* fallen from the hand of Juda,” she said, musingly. “The time approaches. Do you not fear? Are you not trembling with expectation?”

Anna, far-seeing and wise, said nothing. Perhaps she realized, in the depths of her soul, the holy child’s wonderful destiny, though not privileged to speak of it. Perhaps she knew what great honors were in store for Mary, though not allowed to reveal them. At any rate, Mary’s knowledge of heavenly things, her deep introspection, never caused Anna any surprise.

“How happy is David,” continued Mary. “The only one of all mankind who saw the Saviour in the bosom of His Father, begotten ‘before the day-star’;⁶ who saw Him reigning in His beauty, mildness and justice, ‘appointed king by Him over Sion, his holy mountain, preaching his commandment.’”⁷

⁴ Gen. xxii, 18. ⁵ Ibid., xlix, 10. ⁶ Psalms cix, 3. ⁷ Ibid., ii, 6-

She clasped her hands across her breast, a light of deep joy on her countenance.

“O Lord, how great, how powerful, how adorable is Thy holy name!” she exclaimed.

In this way did God dwell in the heart of the Beautiful One, the Lily of Israel. For in the holy Writings she could see and comprehend the future of the Messias. She saw Him suffering upon earth for the sins of all mankind, His feet and hands pierced with nails, blood-stained, weary, His dress torn and disordered, and her own soul pierced with those swords of torment which were afterward to cause her such intense anguish.

Elizabeth, mild and gentle, looked at Anna when Mary had left them.

“Certainly there is a great destiny preparing for this child. Have you ever heard or seen another like her?”

Anna, the Prophetess, much moved, replied:

“The Most High hath sanctified His own tabernacle. God is in the midst thereof, it shall not be moved.”⁸

And her heart was filled with an ever-growing tenderness toward this child of light and purity.

* * * * *

Every day Elizabeth became more attached to her young relative and frequently sent for her to keep

⁸ Psalms xlv, 5, 6.

her company, for, when Zachary's priestly duties detained him in the holy circle, at a distance from the entrance to the portal reserved for women, Elizabeth was lonely. She never ceased speaking of Mary, of Mary's charm and beauty and heavenly disposition. And Zachary, though a cold and reserved man, was as much attracted toward the child as his wife.

"She hears only divine things!" exclaimed Elizabeth one day, shortly after the conversation above recorded. "If you could listen to her discourse on the Holy Scriptures as Anna the Prophetess and I have listened, you would feel your heart kindled with love. When I am near her, Zachary, it seems as if the door of heaven opens to me! Oh, if the Lord had but granted us such a child, how I would have praised Him! But alas, that is my pain! I must be content!"

The sorrow of Elizabeth was as that of Anne, the wife of Joachim. She had no children, and could not throw off the shame that this meant to her as a woman of her race. Zachary often rebuked her for the sadness which at times she could not overcome.

"Well," he said now, "let us adopt our young cousin for our child. I, too, believe that the countenance of God is turned toward her and that she will be the blessing of any house she shall enter."

Elizabeth hesitated.

"I had rather not. I would wait. Anna, whom people call the Prophetess, has bidden us to look

forward to a future which shall contain great joy. Perhaps—”

Zachary shook his head.

“Have your way,” he said, “but count not on such a probability.”

Elizabeth seemed confused. Her husband’s curt dismissal of something so very dear to her was not unexpected, since she knew his brusqueness and domineering manner. Nevertheless, he was noble-hearted and just. So she kept silent, not reverting to the weak little hope that still lingered in her breast.

“After all, what would we profit in adopting Mary?” she said, with a sigh. “She has chosen perpetual chastity for her portion—yes, and in my own presence made a vow of virginity.”

“What!” cried Zachary. “A vow of virginity!” He rose in some perturbation, and hurriedly paced the room. “How could she do so? Now, at this hour, when we approach, after so long an expectation, to the fulfilment of the prophecies! How could she make a vow so contrary to our customs and to the hopes of the times in which we live!”

He was more disturbed than Elizabeth had ever seen him.

“Ah, well!” he resumed, in gentler tones. “She is under my guardianship—I am her nearest relative, now that her father and mother are dead, and the law gives me power to release her from that vow, as it authorizes me to select a husband for her.

But tell me—when did this rash thing happen, Elizabeth?”

“You know how often you have to be absent from me a week at a time to fulfil your sacred duties—” began Elizabeth.

“Yes,” assented her husband.

“You know, also, that I then call some of the young girls from the Temple to dispel my solitude and weariness—”

“Yes—and I am aware how much they appreciate the favor,” said Zachary, smiling, for Elizabeth was dearly loved by all.

“It was in this way that I learned of the affection of the lovely Salome for a young fisherman of the Lake Tiberias, as well as that of the gay-hearted Anais for Orpha, to whom you will soon unite her. And you may be pleased to hear that Salome is now preparing with great diligence for the humble life she is desirous of taking up. Anais”—Elizabeth shook her head—“is different. I can not imagine her the spouse of a poor man—”

“Let us talk of Mary,” interrupted Zachary.

“The last week you were away,” resumed Elizabeth, “I invited Mary to come to me. Never has the time of your absence passed so pleasantly. At the very sight of this young girl the heart is calmed, the mind quieted. She is like a beautiful morning fresh from the hand of God.

“We had spent several days together. You were to come home on the morrow, and in order not to

lose a moment of her precious company, I begged her to pass the night with me. The servants brought us fruit, citron, and flour cakes, and we continued our work rather late, for I was most anxious to finish the band which I intended to give you. Occasionally Mary put down her needle and sang a hymn in a voice that sounded like a nightingale's."

Elizabeth hesitated.

"What I have to tell you now seems almost too sacred to bear repetition. At the hour of the second watch Mary wished to sing again, and took up her kinnor.⁹ She struck some notes which seemed to me to come from some heavenly instrument. But soon I heard a softer, sweeter note. The whole room resounded with harmony."

Zachary, with eyes bent upon the ground, listened with deep attention.

"Then Mary sang. She sang of virginity, declaring that by it womanhood might be raised from the fall of the first of women. My lord, I doubt if you will believe me, but though her words were in direct contradiction to those hopes which we Israelites cherish, I thought them so beautiful, so elevated, that I was filled with respect. My sentiments wholly coincided with hers."

Zachary remained silent.

"When she finished," pursued Elizabeth, "she sat musing a long time, silently listening—as indeed I

⁹ An ancient stringed instrument.

was, also—to the delightful harmony that continued to stir the air about us. Then there was a great noise, like the rushing of a tempestuous wind. The lights of the tapers grew dim. Mary, who had been seated until then, holding the kinnor in her arms, slipped down to her knees, crossed her hands upon her breast, and exclaimed, ‘Yes, my God! I am here! I am yours! I will obey you in everything. I consecrate to you my virginity, now and forever!’

“At these words the music began again, gradually mounting upward, and growing fainter and fainter until at last all was silence.”

“And you did not question Mary about this?” exclaimed Zachary, in astonishment.

“How could I refrain?” said Elizabeth. “She seemed surprised at my questioning, saying, ‘Do you not have, every night, a similar visitation?’ ‘Alas, no!’ I replied. ‘I do not understand,’ she returned. ‘Ever since I can remember—ever since I was an infant in my dear father’s house at Nazareth, I have been thus visited by angels, who come to tell me wonderful things, and teach me the songs of their country. I thought,’ she continued a little anxiously, ‘that this happiness was common to everybody on earth.’

“She was quiet for some time, and I need not tell you that I was too overcome to break in on her reverie. At last, raising her eyes to my face, she said, in her sweet voice, ‘What have I ever done to

merit so great a favor?' And she scarcely spoke again to me until the hour of our parting.

"I do not understand all this, Zachary—but I know that I can only approach, with deepest veneration and respect, a soul so innocent and so pure, whom angels condescend to visit."

There were tears of emotion in Elizabeth's eyes and her voice was husky. Zachary seemed thoughtful and troubled.

"Only he who is born without sin should see God," said the High Priest now. "In what manner is Mary free from the law which weighs upon all the human race?"

He meant to question Mary, to penetrate as deeply as he could into the mysteries surrounding the beautiful daughter of Joachim and Anne. But God was keeping His will to Himself, and, hiding the secrets of the future in Mary's innocent heart, decreed that they should not yet be given to the world.

The Feast of Tabernacles, that great and joyous festival of the Jews, held yearly on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, was beginning. All Judea flocked to Jerusalem, since this was one of the festivals when every Israelite was required to appear before Jehovah. The Temple, the porticoes, the country itself, and the lanes which surrounded it, were crowded with the faithful—and since it is a commemoration of the time when the Israelites dwelt in tents during their sojourn in the wilderness,

they were commanded to live in booths or shelters of green boughs or foliage. Offerings were brought, far more numerous than on any other festival. Priests, Levites, sacrificing priests, choristers, virgins, and musicians—all were engaged in highest or lowest duties.

One burned incense, another presented the victims, others kept the lamps in order, others lifted up the golden censer, others adorned the Temple with vine leaves and flowers. The air was filled with the music of those beautiful canticles of which the people of Babylon were jealous during the period of the Captivity—and the cithern, the nebel, the kinnor, the sambuca, the harp, the flute and cymbal accompanied them. Hearts were raised toward God and the voice of a whole nation offered to the Lord the only incense which is agreeable to Him, the sacrifice of prayer.¹⁰

Zachary, detained in the sanctuary by his priestly duties, could not find time to question Mary, who was mingling with the crowd of virgins in the Temple. It was destined that he was not to question her. Hardly had the last day of the festival come to a close when he was attacked by a sudden and violent illness. He was compelled to leave the Temple at once and return to his native country in the mountains of Judea.

Elizabeth, of course, accompanied him.

¹⁰ Psalms xlix, 14.

INTERLUDE

Angel of Heaven

The holy Virgin has grown up under our protection. Behold her exalted like a cedar in Libanus, and as a cypress-tree on Mount Sion . . . like a palm-tree in Cades, and as a rose-plant in Jericho.¹

Angel of Earth

Behold her as a fair olive-tree in the plains, and as a plane-tree by the water in the streets. (She giveth) a sweet smell like cinnamon and aromatical balm . . . a sweet odor like the best myrrh.² The sons of men behold her and find her beautiful. Their hearts burn with tender affection for her. She is adorned with all the charms of a bride ornamented for her bridegroom.

Angel of Heaven

She that dwelleth in the heart of the Most High shall abide under the protection of the God of heaven. She hath said to the Lord: Thou art my protection and my refuge. My God, in Him will I trust. For He hath delivered me from the snare of the hunters and from the sharp word. He will overshadow thee with His

¹ Ecclus. xxiv, 17, 18.

² Ibid., 10, 20.

shoulders, and under His wings thou shalt trust. His truth shall compass thee with a shield; thou shalt not be afraid of the terror of the night; of the arrow that flieth in the day; of the business that walketh about in the dark, of invasion or of the noonday devil. A thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee.

Thou shalt consider with thine eyes: and shalt see the reward of the wicked. Because Thou, O Lord, art my hope. Thou hast made the Most High thy refuge. There shall no evil come to thee: nor shall the scourge come near thy dwelling. For He hath given His angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways. In their hands they shall bear thee up; lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.³

Angel of Earth

Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk; thou shalt trample under foot the lion and the dragon.⁴ Because she hath hoped in the Lord. He will deliver her. He will protect her because she hath known Him. Like the children in the furnace, she shall go out sound, and without a spot from the fire of the world.

Angel of Heaven

God will support her by His blessed countenance; God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her in the morning early. My brother of the earth, the time is at hand. We shall bring to

³ Psalms xc, 2-12.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

Mary that one whom the Lord has selected to be the companion of her pilgrimage. The just one whose memory shall be blessed. God bestows upon him all the blessings of the earth, confirming His alliance with him.

Angel of Earth

O ye patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob, and David! Leap with joy! Behold your race honored through time and eternity.

Angel of Heaven

Ye heavens, and you, O earth, resound with mirth! The Desired of nations will appear! He will descend upon the earth like the dew upon the flowers in the morning.

Let us bless the Lord! Let us praise Him!

CHAPTER IV

THE CHOICE

MARY had attained her fifteenth year. This was the age when the consecrated virgins left the house of the Lord for their future homes. Their vows ended now, for among the Hebrews marriage was of rigorous obligation.

If Anne and Joachim had been alive, both would have come to present to their daughter the young man whom they had selected for her out of their own family or from their neighborhood. They would have presided at the nuptial festivals, always long, and celebrated with the splendor permitted by the fortune and rank of the affianced. The father would have pronounced the blessings of the Patriarchs upon the happy couple. The mother, covering the bride with a veil embroidered with her own hands, would have explained to her in what manner a woman is called to spread happiness and joy around the days of her husband. The touching example of Anne's beautiful and meek character would have given holy authority to her voice. But that dear voice Mary was destined never to hear again. The counsel which now failed her upon earth

was henceforth to proceed from the Most High, from the Giver of all good things. Being an orphan, and no relative having claimed her guardianship (to the great regret of Elizabeth and Zachary, both were kept by illness from the Holy City), the duty of settling her in life devolved upon the High Priest. Joiada then being in office, he called a Council—and according to the customs of those days it was made known to the young men seeking a wife that one of the maids of the Temple had just reached the age of marriage, and the time was appointed when they should come to solicit her hand.

The report of Mary's extraordinary beauty, her sweetness, her purity, and her maidenly virtues had been circulated throughout the city, for no one could meet the daughter of Anne and Joachim without carrying away an impression of intense respect and affection. Every mother was anxious to obtain her for her son, and the young men, in turn, ardently sought her for a wife. On the day set by Joiada and the Council a number of these repaired to the Temple.

Now Mary, notwithstanding the vow of virginity which she had made, had not attempted to release herself from the law common to all. Perhaps she knew that her opposition would not be listened to. It was more likely, however, that she felt assured of God's care and protection, for she said nothing. Only, before the time, she passed three days and three nights in prayer, and when the assembly opened

in which her fate was to be decided she asked the Council to propound a certain question to each of those who would claim her hand. A simple enough question, but she promised to wed the one who could answer it.

The question appeared insignificant. Yet the acquiescence of the Council to her request was sufficient to calm her fears.

The crowd obstructed the approaches and the entrance of the Temple. The council chamber was given over to the young men who sought the daughter of Joachim in marriage, while their mothers, friends, and relatives were also present to pay them honor, and to show the interest which they took in the success of their wishes.

One, the first to ask for Mary's hand, was called Mahasias, son of Sadoch. He said:

"I have fertile lands, I own rich pastures and fine flocks in the plains of Jericho. I have many servants. I ask the hand of Mary, daughter of Joachim and Anne, in marriage."

Another was called Heli, the son of Nadab:

"My father traded over seas with Tyre and Sidon," he said. "He has left me, as an inheritance, one hundred talents of gold, fifty talents of silver, and his house at Jerusalem, filled with goods of value."

Thus each in turn boasted of his riches and of his qualifications. But Mary, standing concealed beneath her veil amid a group of the Temple virgins,

did not even appear to hear them. With hands clasped on her breast she was silently praying.

When all had finished the enumeration of their wealth and fitness, the young girl advanced rather timidly, saluted the High Priest with deep reverence to remind him of his promise, and then returned again to her young companions, who shielded her from observation.

Joiada then called Mahasias.

"Mahasias, son of Sadoch," he said, gravely, "tell us what, in your estimation, is the most beautiful ornament of woman? Do not hesitate to reply, and may the God of our fathers inspire you."

Mahasias was astonished at this unexpected question. He thought deeply—then, glancing toward Mary, he replied:

"The most beautiful ornament of a woman is her veil, which, concealing her beauty, allows one to imagine it."

The High Priest looked at Mary. She was motionless. Shaking his head, he ordered Heli to come forward, putting to him the same question.

"Necklaces of rubies," declared the wealthy youth, with calm assurance. "Earrings of the finest emeralds of Egypt—such jewels as my mother reserves for the wife of her son."

Mary remained silent.

A third replied: "It is the prudence and wisdom of her mind."

Others gave definitions which proved most clearly their temperaments, but Mary's head was bent, her beautiful face covered, and neither by sign nor by movement did she signify that their answers were pleasing to her. Then came one named Agabus. He had seen Mary in the Temple; he had been impressed by the beauty and purity which had seemed to emanate from every movement. Her chaste and maidenly presence had elevated his soul above the consideration of earthly things.

So, turning his eyes toward her, he answered the question put to him.

"The most beautiful ornament of a woman," he said, in a voice of deep feeling, "is, in my opinion, her modesty."

All eyes were turned toward Mary. At last! Surely Agabus had read her mind! Through her veil the young girl turned her eyes upon him, and in a gentle whisper he heard:

"Good thoughts proceed from the Lord! May He still further enlighten your understanding!"

That was all. She did not manifest her approbation—and the High Priest was astonished. Agabus had, in reality, comprehended the meaning of the question better than any of the others, but he, too, was dismissed, to his great and bitter disappointment. Now the young men who had presented themselves were wealthy and handsome, and many of them held an elevated rank in Jerusalem. The High Priest and Council sent them away regretfully

and all withdrew dissatisfied and downcast. The Council murmured.

“This young girl abuses the privilege which has been granted her.”

But the High Priest knew and loved Mary. He was certain that there was some deep and sacred meaning behind the promise she had given to accept for her husband the man who would answer her question. Because of this he proposed to dissolve the assembly until the following month, for most of the young men were engaged in the harvesting. The Council determined to await their return, and the sitting was about to adjourn when a man who had indeed passed his youth, and, by his attire, seemed to belong to the respected, but struggling class, of artisans, came through the crowd, and asked leave to present himself as the husband of the young Virgin.

The priests looked at one another doubtfully.

They did not know if it were right to grant this request. Mary was descended from the royal race. Her relatives, true, had left her very little wealth, but she was, by her virtue and beauty, the glory and honor of the Temple in which she had been educated. Could they permit this stranger, obscure, yes, almost elderly, for his abundant dark hair was streaked with gray—could they permit him to propose himself as a suitor for the hand of one so eagerly sought by others far his superiors in station and wealth?

"Who are you?" asked Joiada, in a cold voice.

"I am Joseph, the son of Jacob, the son of Mathan, of the house of David," he answered without hesitation and with a calm dignity that insured instant respect. "But my house has fallen into obscurity, and from my youth I have lived by the labor of my hands. I am poor—but I hope, with the help of God, to provide for her who shall entrust her fate to me."

Again the High Priest and Council exchanged doubtful glances. They made no answer—they were dissatisfied and irresolute. But, quite suddenly, from behind the silken veil came the voice of the young girl herself, uttering the question which was to determine her decision.

"O Joseph, son of David, what, in your opinion, is the most beautiful ornament of woman?"

A long, long silence succeeded.

All eyes were turned upon this man, all eyes judged him, considered him. His face was handsome, dignified, calm, but there were wrinkles upon his forehead that told of toil and anxiety; his hair, once coal-dark, was almost white above the temples and ears; silvery threads were visible in his thick dark beard. But there was a serenity in those calm features that no youth could bestow; the deep lines in his forehead, while indicating that the troubles of life were not unknown, indicated also that he had had the fortitude to bear them; his eyes were serene and intelligent, and clear with the beauty of a well-

spent existence. One could not look at him save with esteem and respect.

Mary's question vibrated in the air, as the music of a harp may be heard in its echoes. The man drew his form erect, stood listening an instant, and then answered, firmly and gently.

"The most beautiful ornament of a woman is her inviolate and pure virginity."

Mary stepped forward.

"Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Mathan," she said, "I know by your reply that you are the one that God has sent me. I accept you for my husband, and I will be your affectionate and obedient wife."

"Let God be praised!" said Joseph. He looked at her with tenderness, contemplating the young girl who had given herself to him in such an extraordinary manner, because he had understood the secret meaning of her words.

Yet how could a man, a strict observer and follower of the Jewish Law, conceive so lofty an idea of the sublime dignity of this holy Virgin? Oh, it is because the chosen ones of the Lord exist at all times and in all conditions—and this man, poor in the goods of the world, tried by suffering, had been ennobled, dignified, illumined by the Light, which, at a later period was to enlighten every man that cometh into this world.¹ The Messiah whose father and guardian he was to become in the sight of man,

¹ John i, 9.

had instructed his mind, as the sun, before rising on the horizon, gilds with its rays the ridges of the loftiest mountain.

But the world judges by appearances. With dismay and even grief the High Priest and the members of the Council heard Mary's acceptance of this poor man for her life-companion. They did not know that the angels were transported with joy, both in heaven and on earth; they did not know that it was Joseph, the only man among all the Hebrew race, whose purity of heart and nobility and courage, had rendered him worthy of one who was to be the Queen of angels. They did not know this, and they tried, by every possible and plausible argument, to dissuade her from a decision which they felt was most unwise. Mary, however, fortified by the satisfaction of conscience which Joseph's answer had meant to her, remained immovable.

"For me the will of heaven has been made manifest in the word of Joseph," she answered, steadily.

There was no gainsaying this. Joiada felt her quiet strength and said no more. The espousal ceremonies were immediately performed. One of the treasurers brought Joseph the ring of purest gold which was kept for this ceremony, and Joseph, approaching Mary, placed it on her finger.

"Mary, daughter of Joachim and Anne," he said, "by this ring you are my wife according to the Law of Moses."

"Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Mathan," replied

Mary, "by this ring which I receive, I am your wife before Israel."

Some of the young girls who had been Mary's companions, brought her the presents they had prepared for this festival. One gave her a distaff, covered with the flax of Mizraim; another a very fine sieve to sift the flour; another, sandals which she had splendidly ornamented, expecting to see Mary exalted, as was Queen Esther, to the rank to which her beauty entitled her. They were not pleased with Mary's choice, and since all loved her, their tears could not be controlled, but ran down their cheeks even while they embraced her. Mary's countenance, on the contrary, radiated peace and joy.

"The riches and happiness of this world consist in doing the will of God," she said.

Anna the Prophetess came last, offering her the gift of a purple girdle which she had embroidered with her own hands, and on which were inscribed the words: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root."² The Virgin smiled and kissed her tenderly, but said no word.

A few days later the solemn nuptials took place, and thus it was that Mary became the wife of Joseph, the most upright of men.

² Isaias xi, 1.

CHAPTER V

JERUSALEM AND NAZARETH

UPON leaving the Temple in which they had just been united, Joseph and Mary were absolutely alone. No friend accompanied them, no relative. None came to celebrate the festivities of these nuptials, although the very poorest of the poor in Jerusalem outdid themselves in rendering such an occasion one of rejoicing. It is at such a time that poverty and friendlessness seem doubly mournful.

Joseph walked beside his beautiful young spouse, descending with her the hill of the Temple, and through the winding streets which led to the gate of the valley. It was here, since his wedding, that he had secured a humble dwelling, and as they stood on the threshold of their home he took Mary's hand in his.

"May peace and joy dwell in this house with you, Mary," he said, and then remained silent, contemplating the bareness of the room into which they entered. It seemed very cold and mean after the gorgeous splendor of the Temple. "You are leaving great grandeur, Mary," he went on. "For a long time you have been accustomed to dwell within

walls covered with gold; you have been used to splendid attire; you have been brought up in all the magnificence of the house of the Lord. Are you sure you will be able to endure this poverty?"

"In every station of life are we not under the guidance of the Most High?" asked Mary, and her smile was a benediction. "The only happiness I desire on earth is to serve God here as I did in His Temple."

She seated herself as she spoke, for the noon heat of the city had fatigued her, and throwing back her veil she glanced about her future home. Joseph watched her closely. There was neither doubt nor question on his fine and thoughtful countenance. Small, badly-lighted, poorly-furnished his home might be—but Mary, seated therein, transformed it into a palace. Her veils and tunic did not adorn her. She it was who adorned them, and simple as they were they derived grace and magnificence from her. She was endowed with splendor, and all the kings of the house of David, from whom she was descended, never shone brighter in the midst of the pomp which encircled them than did Mary in Joseph's humble home. She was beautiful and luminous as the morning star.

"Who am I to have so radiant a being for my guest?" thought Joseph, humbly. Aloud he said:

"Had I more to offer I would gladly place it at your disposal, Mary—but at least I give you this and all the labor of my hands. There you will find the room

which is to be yours. Here is mine." He regarded her with gentle, reverent eyes. "Mary, the Lord has indeed united us, but I, for one, can not fathom His purposes. He unites us and He separates us. May His holy will be done! Only believe that you will find in me your faithful protector, your guide and your support, your father, your brother, your friend."

"God is gracious and kind to me, Joseph. In giving me to you He has indeed protected me," said Mary, her pure and innocent countenance shining with gratitude and joy.

"I rejoice that you feel so," said Joseph, gently. "But now I have something to say to you—an explanation to make." He seated himself on the stool before her. "Do not imagine that of my own accord I should have ventured to claim an alliance with you. I would not dream of offering such as you, dear Mary, my poverty and insignificance. But on the very day on which the richest and most illustrious of our young Israelites went to the Temple to seek you in marriage, a youth clothed in white appeared before me in the valley of the workmen. I had arrived only the evening previous, intending to seek work as a carpenter on the palace which Herod is building. Addressing me, the youth said, 'Leave the plane and the square and follow me.'

"I was troubled, but did not dream of disobeying. I left everything and followed the messenger out across the city, to the Temple, where I found myself

saying words which had never entered my head until that moment. And then I was in the presence of the High Priest and of you, Mary. You are aware of the result. You became my wife in the sight of men, my well-beloved sister before God. Mary, I am positive my guide was one of His own angels." He regarded her with serene eyes. "What are we to do to fulfil the purpose of God in us?"

"I do not know," answered Mary. "But we will pray. God will surely continue to instruct us, since all that has happened has occurred because He willed it." She knelt, and Joseph followed her example. The divine harmony of those angelic sounds which Elizabeth had tried to describe to Zachary resounded in Joseph's humble dwelling. He bowed his head and remained so for some moments. Then Mary spoke.

"We have now only to pursue, in all humility, the course which the Most High has laid out for us. Joseph, we will love God and each other, and our brethren, and take up our daily work in thankfulness and peace."

Thus did Mary, the glorious ornament of the Temple, begin her new life in the home of Joseph the carpenter. No longer did she, as formerly, work the twice-dyed garments of Bozra; no longer did she embroider with gold and pearls and hyacinth the rich vestments of the High Priest. The time for such labors as these had passed away. Mary now contentedly arranged her rustic dwelling, keeping it

neat and scrupulously clean. She studied Joseph's wants and tastes and prepared their simple food. Having provided herself with spindle and wool, she began the spinning and weaving of the coarse but good and warm clothing which both were to wear. Joseph went out to his labors in the morning, and when, tired by both toil and heat, he returned to his peaceful little home, he was sure of a gentle, smiling welcome, of a meal ready and waiting for him, though indeed this meal was but of barley bread baked under the ashes, with some cooling fruit, and a cup of wine from the fertile fields of Jericho. Refreshed and comforted, he looked upon Mary as an angel descended from heaven, and wanted to hear the details of her day that so he might listen to the music of her voice.

"What has gone on since morning?" he would ask, with gentle solicitude, and she would tell him of her occupations—though one day was very much like another. Sometimes a woman of the neighborhood, poor like themselves, would come to ask Mary to stay with her old and infirm mother. And the Virgin, seated beside the couch of the sick woman, would talk to her and comfort her. She knew how to soothe away the troubles, the inconveniences, and the sufferings of this present life by pointing to the future. She could show how misery might be sanctified, in order to obtain a reward at the end. Comforted and cheered, this poor soul looked upon Mary as a heavenly visitor, and she would smile upon her

from her bed of suffering, and for hours after Mary had left she would contemplate the joys of paradise, of which the holy Virgin spoke so confidently.

Another time a poor woman traveling with her children, arrived and seated herself close to Mary's dwelling.

"My little ones are hungry," she said when the Virgin approached her with a question on her lips. "From the dawn of day they have cried to me for bread. But my hands are empty! I can give them nothing! Pity them and pity me!"

What an appeal to make to that loving heart! Mary re-entered the house and returned with food—her own meal and a portion of Joseph's, to satisfy the hunger of the little ones. Occurrences like these were part of every day, and though she dwelt lightly on her sacrifices Joseph did not find it difficult to surmise them.

"Mary, my dear sister," he would say, "I do not know what I have done to be rewarded by your presence in my house. Many a weary and miserable hour I passed before I knew you. Great misfortunes weighed upon my youth. My heart has known grief and sorrow. But since that day when you joined your life to mine I have enjoyed peace. I am buoyant and cheerful as I never was in the strength of my early manhood. I feel that I am far happier than I deserve to be."

Resting his head upon his hand, he gazed at her almost mournfully.

“One who has experienced life’s sadness, who has known the weight of care, is almost afraid to welcome joy.”

Mary looked at him mildly.

“Why?” she asked.

“I fear I shall have to pay dearly for these days of peace with you.”

“Ah!” said Mary, “we who live under God’s protection must not allow trouble to take possession of our souls.” She waited a moment, as if collecting her thoughts to comfort him. “If my presence renders you happy, Joseph, it is a reward God has given you for your chaste obedience. As to the disasters which *may* happen,” she smiled brightly, “the Lord will not give us *now* the strength which we will require *then*. The manna which fell in the desert was but for one day’s consumption—yet all were able to satisfy their hunger. God is with us. Let us adore and submit to Him in all humility of heart!”

“God is with us!” echoed Joseph, moved by her tender confidence.

So their sweet and tranquil life went on, Mary preparing herself by prayer for the inscrutable work destined for her by God.

Periods of tribulation come to all, in every state and condition of life. They are never easy to endure, though their benefit depends upon how we bear them. When God speaks, few hearts are so hardened as to remain rebellious. When real sorrow comes

we want to run to Him, as little children fly to father or mother when hurt or wounded.

But if His gracious presence be for a time withdrawn from us; if, after having experienced great elevation of soul it pleases Him to veil His countenance from us; if we no longer feel His influence guiding our footsteps—how hard this withdrawal seems! We are lost in the gloomy clouds, the prey of unrest and dissatisfaction, and only by the most extraordinary efforts can we retain that serenity of soul which is so desirable and so necessary.

But the pure and chaste Virgin, the woman supereminently strong, preserved peace unchangeable in her humble home. Her soul hovered ever in celestial regions. Neither noise nor silence, neither obscurity nor light could, for a single instant, cause her to lose sight of God.

It was not to be expected that Joseph's disposition could be as calm as this. He had known, as he had said, much trouble, and had emerged victorious from the struggle over his human nature. God brings many of us to Him by the trials of this world, and this was the path which Joseph had trod. Misfortune serves to develop the profoundest energies in the life of man, rousing a rugged opposition in the soul, from which will proceed, in the end, that spiritual calm, that sublime life, which craves but those heights to which the soul devoutly aspires. Joseph had reached the serenity of life through its struggles, and the struggles had left their mark upon

him, as they must on every creature born of woman. No wonder, therefore, that he dreaded the change which in his heart of hearts he felt was inevitable.

* * * * *

About a year after the union of Joseph and Mary, the work on which the former had been engaged was completed. No other employment offering itself, they both thought it best to go to Nazareth and take possession of the little house which Anne and Joachim had inhabited and which, with its fields, constituted all of Mary's inheritance.

It was spring-time, and availing themselves of the departure of a great number of travelers who had come to the Temple to celebrate the Passover, they journeyed with them as far as the village in which Mary had been born. It was with intensest joy that the young Virgin entered under that roof which had sheltered her infancy. An aged domestic had remained its guardian, and he wept happy tears on beholding the daughter of his beloved master and friend. He pointed out to her the care which he had taken of the place during her long absence, in order to maintain it in the same condition as it was when Anne and Joachim died. Again and again Mary thanked him for his loving service and the respect paid to the memory of her dead parents.

In her turn she showed everything to Joseph. The small house itself, built beneath the shelter of the rock, which preserved it from the violence of the

winds; the garden planted with lentils, sorrel, and one small plot of maize, another with beans and flowers. There was the fig-tree under which Anne had so often lamented her childlessness, and, nearer the door, the sycamore where she had realized that God was at last to bless her life and Joachim's—and where, also, they had resolved to give their treasure to the Most High in the Temple.

Mary seated herself, as Anne had done, upon the stool, and once again that scene of her childhood rose before her memory. Her eyes were moist as she turned them upon Joseph.

“My dear parents lived here many happy, useful years, Joseph. You are now my father, my mother, all my family; you, whom God has given me for a support and protection—you alone are worthy to live in this spot made sweet and sacred to me by their presence. Oh, may God grant you a long, long life in this dwelling! May we ever be examples of virtue to others as were Anne and Joachim!”

They went into the house, which consisted of a lower room furnished with everything necessary for a humble family. A pretty, spacious bedroom, which had belonged to Anne and Joachim, Mary offered to Joseph, preferring the smaller room, dug out of the solid rock, which she had always occupied, and of which she now wished to resume possession. It was lighted from far above by a crevice which could be covered from the inside, and before which the branches of a vine planted in the garden extended like

a curtain. The flexible stems of the periwinkle-tree, with its blue stars agitated by the slightest breeze, hung in delicate festoons in the room. A spacious nest was still in the tree, concealed as formerly, and Mary was delighted to discover this, for with it the days of her infancy seemed to have returned. She slept happily and peacefully and dreamed of her mother, and in the morning, awakened by the warbling of the birds, she saluted God as the sparrows had already saluted the dawn, with ineffable love.

That room, that little hollow in the rock, which she occupied, the only ornaments of which consisted of a birds' nest and a few flowers, seemed very humble and empty. But to Mary it was a holy spot. There she had dreamed those seraphic dreams of her childhood. Perhaps they would come again, those sweet visions, those brilliant harmonies, which had made her early days so singularly blest.

Ah, with what artless joy she woke in that humble cell, filled with dear, familiar memories! Mary, beloved and exalted, angels will no longer rock you; hope will no longer brood within your azure eyes. The period of dreams, the time of hope, has passed. The divine promise will, ere long, be fulfilled. The heaven of heavens will be opened, to shower upon earth the Desired of nations.¹ Prepare thy heart, O Mary, lest it be overwhelmed by the weight of happiness which is in store for thee!

¹ Isaias xlv, 8.

And thou, my soul, calm thyself. Let not the joy of telling the wonders which are about to be fulfilled in Mary, disturb thee! God of heaven, mighty and wonderful, illumine my mind. And ye, O angels of heaven and earth, sing aloud the wondrous glory which is to be shed upon the earth.

INTERLUDE

Angel of Earth

Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array? . . . The daughters saw her and called her most blessed, the queens . . . praised her.¹ She is fragrant spring, she is decked with roses, and her steps are like the lilies of the valleys.

Angel of Heaven

It is MARY! The Woman before whom will spring open the Everlasting Doors! Riches and glory are hers; magnificence and righteousness abound in her; she bears fruit more wonderful than fine gold and precious stones; she walks in the way of rectitude, the path of prudence, to enrich those who call upon her, to replenish the treasures of those who love her.

All nations call her Blessed. She shall bear, within her bosom, the Man-God.

Angel of Earth

My heart can not contain these happy tidings! It yearns to make them known! Open, ye eternal Gates, open wide, and proclaim the holy Virgin who is to bring forth the Redeemer of the world! Behold the Sanctuary! Behold the true Tabernacle in which the Lord will repose!

¹ Cant. vi, 8, 9.

Angel of Heaven

Open, ye eternal Gates! Open before the blessed Mary! Of her the heavenly choirs continually proclaim: A virgin shall conceive and bring forth a Son, and Emmanuel shall be His name.² The Lord is with thee, Mary! Thy pure body shall bear the Word of God—the immense Word, like unto the noise of mighty waters, which may be heard at the uttermost ends of the earth. The Holy Ghost shall descend upon thee, the Spirit of the Most High shall cover thee with His shadow!

Angel of Earth

Beloved of the Father, honored of the Son, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, even before her birth! Glory, therefore, to the pure and spotless Virgin, created from the beginning.

Angel of Heaven

The depths were not formed when the Immaculate Virgin was conceived by the decrees of the Most High; the fountains had not gushed forth, the mountains were not risen. Before the hills she was conceived!

Angel of Earth

Rejoice with me, all ye who love the world! Behold the pure Virgin, whose name is like a perfume spread abroad. From heaven hope has descended with her upon this earth.

Angel of Heaven

Mary, with thy comeliness and thy beauty, set out, proceed prosperously, and reign.³

² Isaias vii, 14.

³ Psalms xliv, 5.

CHAPTER VI

THE ANNUNCIATION

JOSEPH and Mary had been peacefully settled at Nazareth for many months, when a change occurred. One day, a messenger, travel-stained and weary, his garments covered with dust, arrived in the little town, and asked for the house of the carpenter.

Joseph, busy with plane and saw, welcomed the stranger, and bade him be seated. Without preamble he stated his errand.

“I am from your sister Mary, wife of Cleophas. Her husband has been absent for a long time on a distant mission, the day of his return uncertain. She herself is dangerously ill, and fearful lest her young children should be left, by her death, without a protector, she said to me:

“‘Selim, set out and seek my brother; tell him in his affection not to abandon me in this hour.’ I have, therefore, come without delay. May the Lord move your heart to follow me to the bedside of one who anxiously awaits you.”

And he wiped the perspiration from his sunburned face.

Now Joseph had had, for many long years, no

near relative on earth but this one sister. She had been born when their father was advanced in age, and was, therefore, but a few years older than Mary herself. He had brought her up, given her in marriage, and a deep love had always existed between them. Troubled, he entered the little house.

"My sister—whom may God protect!" he said to Mary, "has sent a messenger, requesting me to go to Mesopotamia. She is dangerously ill. It will mean, my dear Mary, that I must be away from you for several months."

It seemed to him that the Virgin's grave face was tinged with melancholy.

"May the Lord watch over you during my absence, Mary," he continued, affectionately. "Should weariness come upon you, or you feel too lonely, why not take the old servant and visit your cousin Elizabeth? She has often invited you to do so, and no time will be more opportune than this. Would not such a visit please you also? Though," he added, "whatever you wish to do, Mary, will doubtless be well done."

"May the Lord take care of you on your journey," said Mary, gently, "and may He remove the danger of death from our sister. A mother is as necessary to young children as the air they breathe. Why can she not come to live with us? I would cheerfully assist her, and I know we would be dear to each other."

"If it can be so arranged," said Joseph, "I shall

bring my sister back with me. But I am filled with pain and uneasiness at the thought of leaving you—for it seems to me a presage of our last parting. I dread the day that will find you alone in the world. Who will watch over you and protect you then?"

Mary turned her serene gaze upon her spouse.

"Has not God spoken to us?" she said. "He desires my whole heart, and to Him I have given it. My heart is filled with Him, Joseph, and so great is this love that it embraces every other. Do not fear that I shall ever be alone. After God, whatever love I possess is given to those around me. I love all God's creatures, separately and together. Women, children, the old; those who suffer and those who rejoice. My heart belongs to all and to each, since I see in them Him who has created them, who preserves them, and who loves them with so great a love that He prepares a Redeemer to ransom them. Miracle of God! Goodness of God! When, when will the heavens open and rain down upon us the Desired of nations?"

And the Blessed Virgin, transported for a moment from earth by the sublimity of her thoughts, raised her eyes to heaven, the light of holy rapture shining on her pure and beautiful face. Joseph, looking at her, felt that the splendor of her countenance was almost supernatural, that her spirit was gifted from on high.

"A virgin in body and in mind," he thought, reverently. "Guileless and upright—yet this crea-

ture, so exalted and so noble, is humble as the simplest of beings! Her words are so discreet, her thoughts so profound! When did she ever wound the heart of another, even the most despicable? Mock the weak or despise the poor? Daughter of David, you surpass in your purity and simplicity, all the illustrious race from which you spring! It is from you that your ancestors will derive their glory!"

Joseph would not offend that blessed and sweet humility by uttering these thoughts aloud. When the moment of departure arrived, he said, in a voice of deepest tenderness, mingled with intense respect:

"Mary, I leave you without fear or apprehension. I see plainly that you are under the protection of the Most High!"

* * * * *

Mary was left alone after Joseph's departure. There was no need now of the modest occupation that had kept her hands busy, so she gave herself up to the contemplation of Him who reigned absolute Master of her pure soul. She spent her days in prayer, singing the praises of Almighty God. Withdrawing from all earthly objects, she experienced the fullness of heavenly consolation, and God imbued her with His grace and love. He descended into her heart, took possession of it, made it His chosen dwelling. A pure heart is the most noble temple that can be offered to the Lord—and what heart could

be more pure than that of the meek and spotless Virgin, the blessed Vessel of election, chosen throughout eternity to serve as a dwelling of the divine Word when He should become incarnate?

Ah, what pen can relate the mysteries of ineffable love which pass between God and His creature? What pen portray those holy raptures by which the soul is elevated above earth and toward God, there to be lost in His immensity?

“My Well-Beloved to me, and I to Him. He approaches me like a giant who runs his career. He has proceeded from the lofty heaven, and exclaims: Arise, My well-beloved! Come to Me, My dove, and I will load thee with every perfect gift.” And the soul, drawn from its sphere, is overwhelmed in an ocean of love; it experiences delights and ecstasies of which the greatest joy on earth is not even the faintest shadow.

On a certain day, when Mary knelt absorbed in one of these holy and rapturous transports, she saw an angel standing before her, an angel radiant and beautiful. His dress seemed tinged with the glowing pink of the sun's first dawning; his wings, sustaining him in the ambient air, were like mists of azure. Her habitation faded from her sight. She saw but a cloud of gold before her pure and wondering eyes.

And then the angel spoke:

But who can find language worthier to describe

what the sacred writer, inspired by the Holy Ghost, has transmitted to us? Let us humbly prostrate ourselves, while St. Luke describes the marvel that then blessed the earth.

And in the sixth month the Angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth.

To a Virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the Virgin's name was Mary.

And the Angel being come in, said unto her: Hail, full of grace! the Lord is with thee: Blessed art thou among women.

Who having heard was troubled at his saying, and thought within herself what manner of salutation this should be.

And the Angel said to her: Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God.

Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a Son and thou shalt call His name Jesus.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of David His father: and He shall reign in the house of David forever.

And of His kingdom there shall be no end.

And Mary said to the Angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man?

And the Angel, answering, said to her: The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the

Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

And behold thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren.

Because no word shall be impossible with God.

And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word.

And the Angel departed from her.¹

We bow before the adorable mystery upon which the hope of our salvation is founded.

The words of the divine messenger, vibrating through the soul of the most pure Mary, overwhelmed her with so much happiness that without the grace of the Most High she would have been prostrated. She remained absorbed in holy ecstasy, lost in wondering astonishment at the great marvels which were operating within her, marvels of love, immense and unfathomable. He whom the heavens could not contain had descended to her! The Holy Ghost had overshadowed her! God had spoken! God had spoken—and His begotten Word was become incarnate!

Can human mind or heart or soul conceive what passed in Mary's mind and heart and soul? What intimate intercourse was established then between

¹ St. Luke i, 26-38.

God and His creature! Between the Father and the Virgin to whom He entrusted His only-begotten Son! Between infinite Intelligence and finite but pure intelligence, to whom He confided His Word!—that powerful Word which was to redeem and renew the world!

What are the pure and seraphic raptures of the saints transported from earth to visions of heaven, what are the martyrs' ecstasies, what are the joys of souls who know purest and holiest love, compared to the raptures, the ecstasies, the joys, which Mary then experienced, drawing rich draughts of pleasure from the Source of infinite love?

That was, is still, and will ever be the unbounded happiness of the Immaculate Virgin: a happiness similar to that of the elect, but greater and completer than that of all the elect combined.

For Mary, by election, love, and merit, is greater and more magnificently holy than all the saints. She was conceived, spotless and pure, in the bosom of the Father from all Eternity. She has always been, is, and will ever be the mainspring of the Redemption, the new Eve, the Woman by excellence; the spiritual and true Mother of all mankind in soul and in truth.

Mary, most blessed Mary, if thou hadst shed upon us a single drop of the heavenly dew with which thy soul was inundated on that happy day, the whole world would have been changed, the earth would

have experienced a taste of paradise. We should, probably, have more ardently desired our inheritance, which is heaven.

But thou couldst communicate nothing—and there was not too much joy to fortify thee against the frightful load of grief which was afterwards to be thy portion.

The Angels, the Thrones, the Dominations, the innumerable band who watch at the foot of the throne of God, descended upon this earth, and veiling themselves with their wings chanted the eternal hosannas whose harmony had resounded but in heaven. And a voice arose like a wind from the mountains, saying:

“My people, be consoled! O Sion, arise, clothe thyself with strength, and adorn thyself with the vesture of glory. The Lord hath regarded thee with favor. Rejoice, O Earth, and let thy joy break forth in every corner of thy habitations.”

And the earth revolved upon its axis, joyfully; the angels who guarded it praised God for His mercy to man. Our first parents knew once more the happiness they had experienced on the wondrous day of their creation.

And Satan? Ah, if Satan did not feel his punishment the less it was because he could no longer love!



CHAPTER VII

THE VISITATION

AFTER passing some days in serene joyfulness, Mary called to mind the words which the angel had uttered regarding her cousin Elizabeth. Taking with her the old servant and a young girl, she entrusted her dwelling to the care of a poor widow in the neighborhood, and set out on her journey to the mountains of Judea, where lived, not far from Jericho, the priest Zachary and his wife—those dear friends and relatives who had been so kind to Mary when she served the Lord of hosts in the Temple.

She wished to congratulate her beloved cousin on the wonder which had been wrought in her—for no one knew better than Mary how deeply Elizabeth had suffered over this most poignant grief. And perhaps she longed, with all the love and ardor of her pure young heart, to acquaint Elizabeth with the marvel of the angel's tidings, which filled every moment of her day with heavenly peace.

The journey was a long one, but it was made in the midst of the splendor of nature. It was spring-time in a land that knows but a brief winter, and wherever Mary passed, the flowers seemed to raise

their fragrant heads to salute her; the acacia showered down its sweetest-smelling blossoms; the balsam shed abroad its perfume; the willow waved its bright green branches; the almond-tree cast leaves of white and red upon her; the birds sang more melodiously, and fluttered above her on graceful wings; the beasts of the forest forsook their retreats and ventured forth to see her pass. The River Jordan, along whose flowery banks lay part of her journey, threw a silvery stream of sparkling crystal over its pebbly shores, and murmured musically among the reeds. One might imagine that this historic stream already desired to know Him who was to render its waters forever sacred. The whole earth seemed moved to salute the King of glory, who had come to deliver it. And men felt His presence according to the purity of their souls. Some prostrated themselves almost involuntarily before Mary. A great many looked at the little party with indifference, while others experienced a sensation that was kin to fear. For while the King of glory, concealed and hidden, was coming for the salvation of many, He was also set for the destruction of others in Israel.

At length Mary, having passed Daberath, the fertile valley of Jezreel, Archelais, and the torrent of Phasaelis with its limpid waters, perceived, after seven days' travel, the hospitable roofs of Hebron, and the termination of her journey. Alighting from Eleabthona, the gentle and docile ass which

had carried her so faithfully, she went to the spring to lave her feet, hands, and face, dispatching her old servant meanwhile that he might inform Elizabeth of her approach. Following him almost at once, she arrived before her cousin had had time to come to meet her. Entering, Mary saluted her with the customary expression:

“May the peace of the Lord descend upon thee and upon thy dwelling!”

At the sound of these words, uttered in a voice trembling with emotion, Elizabeth was almost overcome, and her unborn infant leaped as if in ecstasy. Inspired by the Holy Ghost, the mother of the Forerunner of our blessed Lord, exclaimed:

“Mary, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!” Humbly prostrating herself, she added, in quivering tones: “Oh, whence is this to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?”¹

Mary wished to reply, but the raptures of joy and gratitude which she had kept confined within her heart until now found an outlet; she stood in the presence of one prepared to understand, to share her sublime enthusiasm.

And Mary said: “My soul doth magnify the Lord:
“And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
“Because He hath regarded the humility of His

¹ St. Luke i, 43.

handmaid; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

“For He that is mighty hath done great things to me: and holy is His name.

“And His mercy is from generation unto generation, to them that fear Him.

“He hath showed might in His arm; He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.

“He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away.

“He hath received Israel, His servant, being mindful of His mercy.

“As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed forever.”²

“Glory be to God, now and forever!” repeated, in low tones, the servants of Elizabeth and Zachary—for all had knelt in silent prayer while the Virgin’s sweet voice sang the holy canticle.

Thus was homage paid to the Son of God.

Zachary had joined them also, and knelt with the others, in spite of his priestly dignity. He, too, felt the presence of the hidden Saviour. But his lips gave forth no sound, for his tongue was silenced, and was to continue so until the birth of the child promised to his old age. He saluted Mary, and then

² St. Luke i, 46-55.

made a sign to Elizabeth to explain to her the cause of his dumbness. Elizabeth did so, adding:

“Ah, Mary, you are happy in believing what has been revealed to you by God. For the Lord is inviolable in His promises, and His servants must not transgress or doubt without being prepared for punishment.”

She put her arm about her young cousin affectionately, and drew her aside. Seating themselves, one listened eagerly to the other, for God's favors had filled them with gratitude, and no words could express the purity of their emotion. Elizabeth had much to ask about Mary's absent husband, of his disposition, of his confidence in his chaste spouse, for she was older than Mary in years and experience.

Mary, holy and innocent, with perfect faith in Him who was preparing such great things within her, was neither disturbed nor uneasy. Her soul soared above all earthly considerations. The world could not trouble her, and even Elizabeth, knowing from past experience her attitude toward life, seemed to realize that Mary's vision was not confined to earthly objects, but that the veil that hangs between them and Eternity had been torn aside for her. She appeared to possess superhuman enlightenment. If so, it was never revealed—yet how could it be supposed, indeed, that she, in whom such miracles were wrought, should be endowed only with these faculties which are the common lot?

One evening, when she was praying on the house-

top where it was her custom to repair at the same hour every day, Elizabeth approached her, and seated herself without speaking. The Virgin seemed lost in contemplation.

The dwelling of Zachary, situated at the foot of the hills, overlooked the then rich and shady valley of the Jordan. It was an Eastern night, so beautiful, so clear, so transparent, that one might imagine himself surrounded by a world of crystal. The nightingale, hidden under a rose of Jericho, was singing; scores of other songsters repeated their long, brilliant, harmonious cadences, which echo endlessly multiplied. The willows, bordering a rippling rivulet flowing across the meadow, were agitated by gentle breezes, while the waters of the river, swollen by a recent storm, extended through the plain, and reflected the starry sky like an immense and brilliant mirror. In the distance Mount Gilead was covered with white vapors, pierced by the splendors of the moon, so that they resembled floating clouds. Mary was accustomed to all this beauty—or, rather, she appeared to see a more wondrous spectacle, to hear far more glorious sounds.

Elizabeth watched her in silence for some time. Then she placed her hand over that of her young cousin.

“Mary,” she murmured, gently.

The Virgin turned her eyes toward her and a little smile hovered about her lips. She did not speak.

“I am uneasy about Zachary,” said Elizabeth, in

a low tone. "The Feast of Tabernacles is approaching and he is in torment, fearing that he will not be able to discharge his priestly duties."

Her voice trembled with anxiety. Mary pressed her hand gently, and the smile did not leave her lips.

"Dear cousin," she said, "let us put our confidence in God. He has decided all—He is the Master of our destiny."

The words fell on Elizabeth's heart like soothing balsam on a wound. And, on the morrow, at the dawning, the Virgin and all who were within hastened to Elizabeth's side. They found her with her son and her husband, Zachary, and both wife and husband were gazing rapturously at the tiny face of their new-born babe.

"And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had showed great mercy toward her and they congratulated with her."³

Eight days later, when the child was to be given his name, they would have bestowed upon him that of Zachary, making signs to his father how he would have him called. Demanding a writing-table, he wrote, saying:

"John is his name."⁴

At which, his tongue being loosened, he gave vent to his song of thanksgiving.

"Thou, child, shall be called the prophet of the

³ St. Luke i, 58.

⁴ Ibid., 63.

Highest, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways.

“To give knowledge of salvation to His people: unto the remission of their sins.

“To enlighten them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death: to direct our feet into the way of peace.”⁵

Full of joy Zachary fell upon his knees, and took his child in his arms, marveling at the miracle that had been wrought. Still kneeling, he held him forth to Mary and to the infant God—that God whose Precursor he was to be. Mary clasped the child to her bosom and kissed him, and held him close against her loving heart. She blessed him with happiness, for she knew how his life was to be bound to that of her divine Son; she blessed him with sorrow, for she knew the pain and cruelty that would mark his earthly existence.

At last, having passed seven days in partaking of the holy rapture of her relatives, she returned once more to Nazareth, and the flowery roads seemed to gain in fragrance and beauty beneath her feet.

⁵ St. Luke i, 76, 77, 79.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION REVEALED TO JOSEPH

JOSEPH had been detained in Mesopotamia a much longer period of time than he had anticipated, for he found his sister in the throes of a severe illness, protracted and dangerous—but terminating favorably. Death was, as yet, far removed from her, and the sight of her dearly-loved brother inspired her with new courage and strength. After some time she regained a portion of her ordinary health. Joseph, unwilling to leave her without a protector in a foreign country, remained with her until she was able to undertake the journey to Nazareth, setting out with her and her two children, James and Jude, and arriving a few weeks after Mary's return from the house of Zachary.

The meeting between Joseph and Mary was a joyous one. Then he led his sister forward.

“Here is our sister, whom I have brought you, according to your wish,” he said to Mary. “She has come to live with us—until the return of Cleophas, at least.” And he added, in a gentle tone, “God has given you both to me. You are all that I have

in the world. I entreat you, therefore, to love each other."

The two young women embraced cordially.

"Sister, my dear sister," said the Virgin, tenderly, "you are most welcome." Mary, wife of Cleophas, was overwhelmed at so warm-hearted a greeting, and her eyes filled with tears.

Joseph had gone outside to bring in his two nephews. He came back now and presented them to his wife.

"Here are the beautiful children our sister has brought us," he said to Mary, and his voice was proud and happy. "Henceforth they will be to us as sons."

The elder of the two, about seven or eight years old, was rather shy and would not come forward, but Jude, the youngest, a fine child, with fair and curly hair, knelt instinctively as soon as he saw Mary and kissed her feet with respect. Mary raised him, and caressed him, and parting his shining curls, pressed her lips to his forehead.

"You will love my boys, because you have always loved me," said Mary to her brother. "But they will not hold the place in your heart of your own children."

Joseph looked at her, puzzled, and then followed her glance, which now rested on Mary, who had called the children to the stone bench on which stood a vessel of glowing fruit, the beauty of which had enticed them. A faintness seized on Joseph. He began

to tremble and turned pale; then, making an excuse, went outside. The voices of the children followed him, and as he crossed the garden, they came out with Mary. She beckoned to him, but he pretended not to see the motion, going out by the entrance which looked toward the fields.

Mary now rejoined her new sister, and both seated themselves under the eaves of the house to find shelter from the storm, which had already begun to bend the tops of the trees. The two young women conversed for a long time on the happenings of years gone by, with which they felt the necessity of becoming acquainted in order to understand and love each other. For friendship is not satisfied with the present. It takes possession of the past as it desires to take possession of the future, forming a sort of eternity. The one spoke of the Temple and the sweet reminiscences of her life within its shelter; the other told of her infancy passed with Joseph, under whose care the early death of her parents had placed her. Mary listened with pleased satisfaction to these things which the other Mary's filial and tender affection still loved to dwell on. Affection for the true and good-hearted Joseph was to prove the bond of love between their two souls. The mother spoke of her children, adding:

"Indeed, sister, your own coming blessing will only cause you to love my brother more," and she gazed at her with gentle sympathy.

The holy Virgin cast down her eyes, and was

silent a moment. When she raised them it was to say, in a sweet and serious manner:

“Children are indeed the gift of God. I thank Him continually, and my soul is lost in praise when I consider all the good with which He has overwhelmed His servant.”

Mary perceived instantly what Joseph had tried to impress upon her—that God was always present in the Virgin’s heart. She seemed so pure and so holy and so far removed from earth that her thoughts were elevated to an intense degree.

“Mary, I speak according to what is in my mind,” she said, humbly. “Worldly feelings have perhaps occupied it too long. From you, who are so wise and so spiritual, I shall hope to learn a different speech.”

The decline of evening found them still beside each other, but it was now time to retire, and the traveler, with her two little ones, gladly sought repose. Mary entered her cell, and casting herself beside her couch, prayed fervently for Joseph. She had observed his uneasiness, and she begged God to console him and not allow his just heart to bear unnecessary sorrow.

As to Joseph, he was a prey to the most intense grief. He did not perceive the naked rocks among which he walked, neither was he aware of the tempest which bent the trees and scattered withered leaves and broken branches in his path. He neither felt nor heard the sharp whistling of the wind. His

ears were deaf to the terrific claps of thunder. One thought alone filled him, and from this thought his noble soul shrank as if he had blasphemed.

What! He to doubt Mary—Mary, the essence of candor and purity and sincerity—Mary, the angelic, the noble. . . . The most agonizing conjectures ran through his mind. He was “a just man,” a faithful observer of the Law. “My angel, my shield, my strength, my counselor, my guide and consolation,” he called her, the while his heart ached within his bosom. “How can I endure life away from her?”

When he at last arrived at a conclusion—being “not willing publicly to expose her,” he “was minded to put her away privately”¹—the tears of a man in agony rose to his eyes. Perhaps it was at that moment that Mary’s prayers ascended for him to the throne of God, and the Lord commanded His angel to go and alleviate the mind of His servant Joseph.

And the angel came. In the heavy sleep that overpowered the just spouse of Mary, he revealed to him the profound mysteries of the Redemption. Well might Joseph, in this slumber, see Adam, wrapped in sin as in a winding-sheet. Well might he imagine that he heard his words.

“Joseph, through the wife God gave me, the serpent tempted me. We have fallen, we and our seed. The whole of creation, of which we were the rulers, has fallen with us. But Mary—Mary, by

¹ St. Matthew i, 19.

her glorious purity—has bruised the serpent's head. Rejoice, rejoice, our race is saved! Mary, the spiritual Eve, brings it forth to a new life."

With what joy was the heart of Joseph now suffused! The burdens rolled away. His ears harkened to the words of the shining angel:

"Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

"And she shall bring forth a Son: and thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins."²

"Let not thy thoughts distract thee! Instead, raise them continuously to the Lord!"

With humility and love and sorrow Joseph prostrated himself, praising God. As soon as day appeared he entered his dwelling, and when he saw Mary, he knelt before her, worshiping the holy Child.

* * * * *

The weeks that followed were serene and peaceful. Joy reigned paramount in that happy cot, which, humble as it was, became more sacred and glorious than the Holy of holies, for the Holy of holies contained but the type of Him who really and truly dwelt in Mary as in a temple purer and more magnificent than the most wonderful shrine ever raised by human hands.

² St. Matthew i, 20, 21.

And the angels served their Queen on bended knees, the heavens bowed down to earth; a new order of things was established now that the Word of God dwelt among men. The world of spirit and the world of sense were no longer separated. All miracles became the necessary results of a greater, a more incomprehensible miracle—the Incarnation of God.

CHAPTER IX

THE NATIVITY

AT the period when these events occurred, the Romans, rulers of the earth, always masters abroad, though consumed at home by hideous vices, had extended their iron yoke even as far as the East. Augustus Cæsar, wishing to ascertain the number of subjects over whom he held sway, had just issued an edict in which he commanded a general census to be taken of all the nations subdued by the Roman empire—from the Druidical forests of Gaul as far as the banks of the Euphrates, where a corrupt civilization was destroying, by effeminate luxury, the successors of Alexander. Men, women, and children, the young and the aged, all were to be enumerated like a single flock, not to inquire into their wants or to ease the burden of misery under which they groaned, but to ascertain what taxes might still be imposed upon them. The unbridled luxury of the Imperial City at that time absorbed all the riches of the then inhabited earth; the Roman emperors, not knowing or allowing any other deities than themselves to be worshiped, looked upon the

world as a prey which they might devour according to the dictates of their caprices.

The Roman governors were charged with the execution of this new edict, each in the province under his authority. The people inhabiting Palestine were ordered to register, every man in the place of his birth. But the Israelites, scattered over all parts of Judea, in consequence of the increase of their families and their numerous wants, still adhered to their ancient custom, which was to rank themselves by family or tribe. Therefore Joseph, of the family of David, was obliged to inscribe himself among his brethren of Bethlehem.

“We must go, Mary,” said Joseph, one morning, on returning from the Council of the Elders, where the edict had just been proclaimed. “We are entering upon the winter, and it appears that it will be of unusual severity. Already the snow covers the lofty summits of Libanus, and the storks traverse the plain. A long and rough journey stretches before us, and for that reason I think we should start at once.”

“Let us depart then,” said Mary, “without fear.”

She understood his misgivings, but they did not disturb her serenity.

“God is guiding us, dear Joseph,” she continued. “We can only fulfil His divine decrees.”

For the young maid of Galilee was revolving even then in her mind the words of Micheas. “And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thou-

sands of Juda; out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel.”¹

The wife of Cleophas was to remain at Nazareth until the arrival of her husband—now a matter of daily expectancy—when she would set out with him and their children and insert their names in his tribe. Joseph and Mary, bidding her an affectionate farewell, began their journey immediately. The beautiful Virgin was covered with a long cloak and thick veil and seated on Eleabthona. Joseph, wrapped in a heavy coat of goat’s hair, led the little animal by the bridle, in order to render its step more secure beneath its precious burden. Piously he invoked their guardian angels to guide them. Some of the inhabitants of Nazareth who also belonged to the numerous tribe of David accompanied them.

The face of nature contrasted tremendously with those days in the spring when Mary had set forth to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The sky was dull and covered with clouds; the rocks, stripped of verdure, presented summits that were naked and rugged; the notes of the birds were no longer heard; the torrents were troubled; the leaves, falling from oak and sycamore, sank with a melancholy rustling; the wind itself bore a mournful sound, and the earth, shrouded in hoar-frost, seemed to wear an aspect unfamiliar in that beautiful country, ordinarily so highly favored.

¹ Micheas v, 4.

The sweet Virgin could not but contrast the present sterility with the loveliness which had greeted her so short a while before. Nature's altered appearance seemed symbolical of the future. In that hour, perhaps, she experienced, by anticipation, the joys and sorrows which awaited her and her dearly-loved Son. The contrast was inevitable. The spring had poured forth upon her all its favors; roses, perfume, sunshine, the beauty of night, the splendor of day had surrounded her. All nature had visibly rejoiced. But now that the time approached for the birth of the Son of God, all seemed gloom and decay. Each day's journey was more irksome than the one that had preceded it. The wind grew colder and more piercing; the sea-bird's mournful cry was filled with sorrow, and occasionally, from the rocks and caves hidden in the wilderness, the roars of wild animals could be heard in all their frightening intensity.

These scenes of wintry mournfulness in that land of Israel, so long called the Promised Land, were now succeeded by others of a directly opposite character. For when the caravan had passed through the narrow defiles and left Mount Carmel behind; when it descended into the plain, sheltered from the north wind by the contiguous mountains, it again encountered a pleasing landscape as far as Bethlehem—Bethlehem, the house of bread, called also Ephrata, "fruitful," since all good was to spring from it. From a distance the travelers hailed the town as

the termination of their long journey, but still more as the city of David, Obed, and Booz. All forgot the mournfulness which had been the chief impression since they left Nazareth—excepting Mary, the Mother, whose foresight had identified the future in the present.

The approaches to the town were crowded with travelers of every rank and of every age. They came from the remotest parts of Judea to be inscribed in that little city, for the tribe of David was, as we have said, one of the most numerous, and for that reason the most scattered. Some had left the mountains of Lebanon, where they kept their numerous flocks. These had descended into the plain upon strong asses. Some came from towns beyond the Jordan, where, by marriage, they had settled themselves, and now they brought with them numerous sons and daughters. Others came from Bozra, where for a long time they had practised the art of dyeing the most beautiful and celebrated purple. Others still from Mizraim, where was cultivated the flax from which tunics were made. Everywhere were men, women, and children—whole families with camels, dromedaries, and long files of carriages in which the older people had traveled on account of the bad season.

It was near the third hour when the holy couple drew nigh to Bethlehem. Their companions had left them to seek relatives residing in the town. The little animal on which Mary rode was fatigued,

and proceeded with difficulty. Joseph, consumed with anxiety, forgot his own bodily weariness in the trouble that now confronted them. For when they presented themselves at the inn, it was so crowded with guests that it was impossible even to cross its threshold. A house was pointed out to them further on, but this also was filled to the very doors. Again and again they sought admission within the precincts of the town. Not only were they unsuccessful, but rude voices bade them begone. No one wished to welcome the two humble strangers.

Night approached swiftly. It became icy-cold; a raw, dense mist enveloped the earth. Mary and Joseph were well-nigh exhausted, and their poor dumb beast tottered along beside them, panting with fatigue. Yet where were they to go? Every door was closed against them—as well might they have been in a desert, for all the cheer or comfort that was proffered.

For the first time in her life, Mary, the tender, the charitable, the loving Mary, felt something of the keen abandonment which her Son was one day to experience. Her soul was wrung with grief. She understood that to which, until then, she had been a stranger—how cold is man toward his fellow. Never had Mary beheld a single human being in distress without hastening to his assistance, giving him either from the little worldly goods she possessed, or tenderly consoling him. And now, out of all these people, not one turned a glance of pity in their direction.

“And yet,” she thought, within her pure heart, “these are the souls to whom the Saviour is coming. He is to redeem them. They are torpid, but they will be aroused. And how precious they are, since God is about to bestow His Son upon them, to save them and all creatures.” And this thought so comforted her that she blessed them all, notwithstanding their indifference.

Joseph found a sheltered place near one of the closed houses, and helped Mary to be seated. He then gave a little barley to poor Eleabthona, and took some fruit from a basket fastened to the saddle. The busy hum of the crowd had died away. Mary shivered and drew her cloak about her.

“We can not remain here,” said Joseph, “and you, my dear Mary, are not fit to go on.” His anxiety was acute. “It is no use looking further within the town.”

“Perhaps,” said Mary, “we could go back part of the way, and find shelter under a tree—or beneath that great rock which we passed at noon.”

Joseph immediately remembered the halting. They had paused under a large olive-tree, and close to it he had perceived a grotto cut in the rock, which he now thought might serve as a refuge. They rose at once. A cold wind blew upon them, and Joseph, taking off his cloak, wrapped it about Mary. They walked as fast as their weariness permitted, and at length arrived at the grotto. They were just in time, for so fatigued were they both that neither could have traveled another step.

Upon entering the grotto they were surprised at the sensation of warmth that greeted them. The moon, high in the heavens, shone through a crevice in the upper part of the rock, and showed them two beautiful white heifers, who had been left there for safe keeping by some shepherd, and whose presence and breath warmed the little cave.

"May God be praised!" ejaculated Joseph. "He has certainly guided us to this place. Here, at least, Mary, you will be enabled to rest in safety, and to-morrow I shall surely find a better habitation." He threw some sheaves of straw upon the ground, and Mary, utterly overcome, gathered her robe and veil about her and quickly fell asleep. Joseph spread other sheaves before the entrance, and placed himself between it and Mary to serve as a screen.

If Joseph had suffered much physically during this journey, his soul had been a prey to the most acute sorrow because of Mary. He had formerly believed, in common with the greater number of Hebrews, that the King of glory announced by oracles, hailed by prophets, expected by nations, would appear surrounded by all the splendors of the world. Yet the divine Child was coming at a time when Mary and Joseph were really poor—poorer than they had ever been. They, the descendants of the royal race, to which so many wonders had been promised, had wandered about for almost a day unable to secure an abode, rejected, yes, even despised by all!

Joseph sighed, and closed his eyes wearily. He was too tired to pursue this train of thought, and raising his soul to God in an act of sublime resignation, he sank into deep slumber. All was quiet. The soft breath of the sleeping Virgin barely parted her lips. The warmth and shelter of the little grotto were grateful to their tired limbs.

Silence reigned—a silence such as has never prevailed upon the earth before or since; silence, profound as death, but instinct with life and promise.

* * * * *

Joseph opened his eyes suddenly.

Whence is that dazzling light that is shed throughout the grotto, illuminating it with extraordinary beauty? Whence proceed those canticles, accompanied by the musical rustling of wings? Whence that brightness, that sweet perfume? Joseph, half-awake, drank in the sweet sounds, hardly daring to move. And then he was able to distinguish words filled with celestial harmony:

“The Saviour of the world has arisen:
Like a sun He rises in the East.
He descends upon the universe as rain
Doth fall upon its surface to renew it.
The Saviour of the world has arisen:
The Saviour of the world has appeared!”

And the chorus resounded again and again, so full of joyous melody that human heart could barely endure its sweetness.

“Glory to God in the highest
And on earth peace
To men of good will!”

Joseph arose, and threw off his cloak. His vision, at first confused, became clearer, and he drew in his breath with a great gasp of awe, of almost overwhelming wonder. For, enveloped in that golden light, seated upon the heaped-up sheaves, was Mary, radiant in the splendor of her glorious Maternity, holding a little Child upon her knees! She saw nothing, heard nothing, observed nothing but the tiny Infant. No words could describe her expression of unbounded affection, tenderness, and respect.

Yet the Child resembled any other new-born infant. Like others, He was small and weak; like others, He uttered faint cries, for life was a new and strange experience. But rays of light, rays of heavenly purity, issued from His tiny body. They illumined the grotto, and all that it contained. The poor straw gleamed like gold; they shone on the milk-white heifers, the docile beast that had borne Mother and Child during the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They glorified Mary's reverent, tender face; they fell on the innumerable angelic spirits, now adoring their Lord and God; on Joseph, who rose to his feet but to fall upon his knees and join his loving worship to that of the happy Mother.

Gone were fatigue and sorrow and question and misgiving; gone was every shadow from heart and

mind; gone was his anxiety for the future, his dread of what was to come; his fear of his own weakness which would prevent him from providing for Mother and Child! New strength flowed like a flood through every vein; new ardor and hope revived his mind. Prayer and adoration rose to the throne of God from his grateful soul, as he knelt with clasped hands before this tiny Infant, who embodied the goodness and mercy of the Creator of the universe.

“Glory be to God in the highest . . . and on earth . . . peace . . . to men of good will!”

Now the melody resounded through the night, dying away to sweetest echo, again mounting the heights triumphantly. Time passed—but no one knew that time existed. Joseph was lost in rapturous ecstasy, joining, in a low voice, his own praises to the glorious chorus of angels, seraphim, cherubim, archangels, who sang continuously that rapturous refrain:

“Glory be to God in the highest . . . and on earth . . . peace . . . to men of good will!”

Ah, Joseph, blessed Joseph, this was indeed a reward exceeding great for thy patience and kindness and noble charity; for thy life of good deeds, and thy prompt fulfilment of the law of God!

* * * * *

And Mary?

Who can describe her transports? O young

mother who reads this page, you are full of affection, claspng your child in your arms, and you know the joy of maternity. You are filled with a happiness which resembles that of heaven, so pure it is, so complete does it appear. And yet . . . you embrace but a creature, inferior, fallen, destined to sin, doomed to death. You know not what pains, what fears, even what misfortunes are reserved for your loving heart through this one small babe.

But Mary cradles a God in her sweet young arms.

This Child contains in Himself all light, for He is the Author of light; all virtue, for virtue emanates from Him; all strength and beauty, for all strength and beauty proceed from Him. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of perfection.

Tell me, earthly mother, if your heart seems scarce able to hold the feelings which overwhelm it—can you comprehend how the heart of Mary was able to sustain itself under the emotion which must have filled it now? But oh, how her heart was raised above the earth! She loved her Son as Eve loved her first-born; as the mother of Moses loved him whom she was compelled to expose on the banks of the Nile; as the mother of the Machabees loved those sons who were doomed to death; as every mother who has died for her child has loved it; as all mothers love their children. For she, the complete prototype of an indivisible love, possessed in herself alone what all other mothers possess in a limited degree.

But the measure of her joy is to be the measure of her grief. She is to suffer as Eve suffered at the death of Abel; as Sarah suffered over Isaac; as the mother of Moses suffered when the waters bore away her little son; as the mother of the Machabees; as those mothers have suffered who have died for their children! She will suffer as all mothers together have ever suffered.

And her soul, rejoicing with as great joy as all the joys of earth combined can give, was to suffer with as great a suffering as all the sorrows of earth combined.

CHAPTER X

THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

NOW it happened that in the third watch of that miraculous night, some shepherds of Madian who were tending their flocks, as David did formerly in the cool solitudes of Hebron, saw advancing toward them an angel, clothed in overpowering brightness. He floated through the airy void like a great dove of heaven, followed by a numerous company of beautiful winged angels like unto himself. Standing by the awestruck shepherds, who feared with a great fear, he cried out, in a voice that penetrated into the depths of their hearts:

“Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people;

“For this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David.

“And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger.”¹

The winged cohort departed, leaving a track of

¹ St. Luke ii, 10-12.

light across the velvety midnight sky. For a long time the shepherds stood gazing upward, their eyes on the heavenly brightness. They did not quite understand the words which had been spoken, but their hearts were filled with such exultant joy that they felt impelled to follow the angels, and see what they might see.

So they left their rudely constructed huts, and their large flocks to the care of a shepherd, and went after the angels, taking with them only their crooks and wallets, and one or two newly-born lambs.

“Let us go over to Bethlehem,” they said, “and let us see this word which has come to pass—which the Lord hath showed to us.”²

They could talk of nothing, think of nothing but the sight just witnessed, and the message which called them to forsake everything and follow wherever the shining light would lead. A glad joyousness uplifted every heart—a joy that nature itself seemed to share. Clouds flitted across the sky in orderly array, seeming in this wise to be setting out with them on the same journey; the evergreen leaves of the laurel and the pine trembled as they passed; all the earth seemed wrought up at the coming of the Saviour.

They approached the road to the town, and were already calculating how long it would be ere they

² St. Luke ii, 15.

could enter it, when the divine hosannas they had previously heard fell upon their ears. Before them they saw the great olive-tree, and the mysterious grotto. They paused, marveling, wondering. Was it *here* that the King, the newly-born Saviour, was enthroned?

“How shall we venture to approach this King?” asked one of them timidly. “Wearing garments of purple and gold, and like another Solomon in majesty—”

Though a young man, and clothed in the skin of a lion he had strangled with his own hands, he trembled at the thought.

“No matter,” cried another, stoutly. “He has called us. We do not understand, but we have come. Let us go—let us gaze upon Him in His glory and magnificence!”

They approached. They entered the grotto. And what did they behold?

“Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger.”³

Only a new-born child, a tiny babe, in all its weakness, lying in a manger upon a sheaf of straw! His suite of attendants was a woman young in years, a man of middle age, and grouped about the back of the grotto a few domestic animals.

A king? Where are the crown and scepter of the king? Where are his honors, his splendors, his riches

³ St. Luke ii, 16.

of purple and gold? Where are the ministers and powerful men of the new kingdom?

Only a child, a little child, poor, weak, and naked.

Yes, undoubtedly. But no man ever knelt before an earthly king as this one man kneels before this little Child; no woman more beautiful, more celestial, more innocent, has ever worshiped at an earthly throne with such reverence as this glorious creature does beside the poor manger-bed. And for attendants, the adoring angels pass constantly to and fro, or kneel before Him, in sublimest awe, with bowed head and folded wings.

This poor and weak child, abandoned, seemingly, in so obscure a dwelling, shines with a light divine, the rays of which encompass those who surround Him. At the sight the simple shepherds found no room for doubt. "Seeing, they understood."⁴ Their hearts swelled with rapture in their breasts. He is a King—a King, indeed! The King of the weak, the humble, and the poor! The King of those who are oppressed on earth, and suffer tribulation. His ears will listen to their sighs. His mouth will command the rich to tremble and the poor to hope. His heart, gentle and merciful, will raise all men from abjection. His understanding will free the world and alleviate all suffering. His is the light that will enlighten all hearts!

"The Lord hath sent His redemption to His

⁴ St. Luke ii, 17.

people," cried the shepherds with one voice. "He hath commanded His covenant forever. Light has risen in the midst of darkness upon those who are sincere of heart. Let the heavens rejoice, and the earth leap with great joy at this, the sight of the Lord who hath come to His people who have awaited Him!"

Prostrating themselves to the ground, they adored and worshiped with all their hearts, and kneeling, presented their gifts—a little milk, a honeycomb, the fawn of an antelope, a milk-white lamb. They went away then, for their duties called them urgently, "Glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen."⁵ Full of confidence and exultation, they went to circulate among their kindred and companions the joyous news.

"For a Child is born to us, and a Son is given to us, and the government is upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace."⁶

Mary still held her divine Son in her tender arms—no purer throne could He have had on earth!—when Elizabeth, followed by Zachary, carrying a beautiful boy, entered the grotto. All three had been to Bethlehem, and after having inscribed their names on the roll of the census were returning home. But in a dream they were told where they might find Mary and her Child. Forthwith, they sought the

⁵ St. Luke ii, 20.

⁶ Isaias ix, 6.

place, that they might worship at the cradle of the Saviour. Elizabeth, approaching, full of love for her cousin and the Babe, would have clasped both in her arms. But a curious trembling seized upon her, and instead she cast herself upon her knees. Zachary knelt, also, and both were silent, the while their hearts beat violently in their breasts.

John, supported by his mother, endeavored to reach the Saviour. Stretching out his little arms, he at last caught one of the hands of the divine Infant, and kissed it with childish glee. The eyes of Jesus were fastened upon him and both children gazed intently at each other. The mothers looked with love and joy on this affecting scene. Elizabeth wept, the tears falling down her cheeks like rain.

But Mary shed no tears. Her soul comprehended the boundlessness, the majesty of the Being encompassed by her arms, and emotion seemed too remote, too earthly. Surely in that happy moment of reunion, these loving souls enjoyed beforehand the bliss of heaven.

* * * * *

The nations had long known the promises of God. All were expectant, watchful—some in fear, others in hope, for the advent of that Messiah, of that Saviour promised to the earth, to renew and change the face thereof. The periods announced by the Prophets had arrived. The weeks foretold by Daniel were now accomplished. The promises, yes, the

threats, uttered by Isaias were in course of fulfilment. The earth was at peace, after long and sanguinary wars, and for over twenty years the throne had no longer remained in the house of Juda.

Herod, a foreigner, unworthily named "the Great,"—a title given, in all probability, by a people too prone to allow the parade of viciousness to usurp the prerogatives of real greatness—possessed the throne in the name of the Romans, of whom he was, in truth, the slave. He contaminated his place of loftiness by every crime. Murder and incest reigned in conjunction with him, and these vices did not fail to arouse the indignation of the elder Hebrews, whose customs were virtuous and simple.

Israel, deploring its humiliations, raised suppliant hands to the Lord. The people asked themselves where, when, and how the King of glory should be born—that King in whom was centered all their hopes. They dwelt on the miracles which would signalize the coming of Him who was to reign victorious over Israel.

They did not dream, however, of spiritual conquest. They were looking to their old-time glory, to the conquering and enslaving of the world, to the possession of the riches and treasures of the earth. The coming of the King, the great Messiah, meant war, victory, the subjugation and extirpation of all the enemies of God's chosen people.

He it was, the Promised One, who would deliver them from the yoke. He it was who would lead them

to combat and battle. Enslaved they were, but they would become masters. Had not the Lord delivered to them their enemies? No olden triumph of the race had ever equaled that which they expected from the One desired above all others for four thousand years. From high places they cast their eyes, impatient to contemplate the King who had been promised. From among the rich and the great they expected to see Him arise like a brilliant star.

And He came . . . a little Babe . . . born of a Virgin; His foster-father a humble carpenter . . . weak . . . poor . . . with not a place wherein to lay His head!

A small number of adorers were alone worthy of being admitted to this mystery of divine humiliation. The multitude were seeking the Messiah, the great and glorious One, even while the poor shepherds knelt before the wooden manger that cradled Him. This infant King did not overwhelm the simplicity of their hearts by His touching majesty. They were lost in awe and astonishment, but they were not terrified.

And now the great Creator wished the Wise Men to behold His Son. He conducted them, therefore, to His feet—that they, the simple and wise, might meet in His presence. For the emotions of the heart issue from the same source—which is God—in the great and the lowly.

At the threefold blessed period of the birth of the Saviour a new star arose, appearing in great splendor to the Magi, or the Wise Men of the East.

CHAPTER XI

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

BUT, ere the Wise Men came to adore Him, Mary, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary, the gentle and humble, desired to take up her ordinary occupations, thus to veil the divine gifts bestowed upon her. As a simple woman, to whom legal purification might have become necessary, in order to wash away the stains which Eve had placed upon such as become both wife and mother, Mary bent her way toward the Temple, accompanied by her grave and dignified spouse, whose presence was safeguard and shield to her and to her Son. The holy Virgin was without spot, immaculate as a lily, perfect as the mystical rose of Sharon, but the wonders of her miraculous motherhood were long to remain hidden from the world.

When Mary entered the Temple, with her Son in her arms, an old man named Simeon—a man most righteous among the righteous—drew near. He had received a promise, through an angel, that he should not die until he had seen the Saviour of the world. When his eyes fell upon the Child, he advanced toward Him and extending his arms, exclaimed, in a trembling voice:

“Now Thou dost dismiss Thy servant, O Lord, according to Thy word, in peace. Because my eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples. A light to the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.”¹

Uttering this canticle of love, the old man raised his trembling hands, and blessed Joseph, Mary, and the divine Infant. But twice he blessed Mary, saying: “Strengthen thy heart by prayer, for thine own soul a sword shall pierce on account of this Child!”

And Anna, daughter of Phanuel, who still lived within the sacred precincts of the Temple, as when Mary served with the consecrated virgins, came also to salute her.

“Behold the young shoot from the house of Jesse, which I promised to you when you left the shelter of the Temple. Do you remember, Mary?”

The Virgin recalled the words worked in embroidery upon the girdle which Anna had given her and of which, at the time, she had thought but little.

“Your many days of holiness in the house of God have given you great knowledge,” she replied.

Anna’s eyes were suffused with tears. Putting her arms about the young Virgin, she blessed her.

“Great is the joy in thy heart, O Mary, because the Lord hath wrought glorious things within thee.

¹ St. Luke ii, 29-32.

But fortify thyself, for on account of this Child thy heart will be pierced with an excess of grief."

"Peace!" said Mary, gently. "Let us leave for each day its own pain and suffering—doubting not that he who hopes in God will have strength for evils as they come."

Thus did she speak to show her trust in the Most High. But the mother-heart within was sorely troubled, and she left the Temple oppressed with sorrow, clasping her beautiful Child to her bosom, wishing, indeed, that she might hide Him therein, to shield and preserve Him from every threatening danger and suffering. The dreadful words of Simeon and Anna had partly opened the door of the future. The opprobrium, the torments, Calvary, the dying moments of that One so well-beloved, seemed to sting her very soul, her tender heart, even as a sharp-edged sword might pierce that heart to its core. At that trying moment she was almost ready to ask God to take her from this world ere that time arrived.

But who would suffer with that dear, that precious, that beloved Son, if His Mother shrank from sharing His grief and torture? And the holy Virgin, in whom were united all the simple and sublime virtues, strengthening herself with love, regained her usual calm by a tremendous effort.

"May the will of God be accomplished toward His Son, and toward me, and toward the whole world! May He sustain me that I may submit to it without a murmur. Who am I to resist God?"

CHAPTER XII

THE ADORATION OF THE WISE MEN

WHAT was there so mysterious in the new star? Why should it so irresistibly rivet the attention of those beings for whose special observation and attention it had been cast upon the celestial vault of heaven? The God who sent it alone knew what symbol He had attached to it to make them acknowledge its power.

The Magi saw it, each from a different part of his own country and came together that they might discuss the mysterious sign which had appeared in the heavens.

These men possessed all the human learning which was at that time spread throughout the world. There is no doubt that each, impelled by some subtle influence, wished to place the results of his acquired knowledge and science at the feet of Him whose advent was to revolutionize the earth, to replace the carnal by the spiritual, to set moral force above physical force.

Mysterious were the words that were exchanged between them and the secrets shared by them in common. All experienced astonishment, mingled

with joy and admiration, when they saw that the grand issue of all their study revolved about the expectation of the Messias. In Jerusalem alone could they expect to learn of His coming, so toward Jerusalem they would wend their way.

“The time approaches—the time is here!” they exclaimed.

Assembling their attendants, and mounting their camels, the Magi began their journey of unknown duration. Arriving at the Plain of Sennaar, they followed the banks of the Euphrates, passed into Syria across scorching deserts, and stopped at Palmyra, the town of Solomon, where they remained a day to salute this Queen of the desert. They saw Damascus the superb, arrived at Mount Hermon, and descended into the plain of Upper Galilee. From this place they took the main road that leads to Jerusalem, across the shady valleys, and the rocks of Judea studded with tamarind-trees and green oaks, leaving, on the left, the distant mountains of Galaad and on the right the more distant heights of Garizim and Hebal, and the perfidious Sichem, which is situated between their arid and naked sides.

In each of the towns where the Magi stopped, they found the people busily engaged. In one place with the harvest, in another with warlike declarations or treaties of peace; there with taxes, or with a levy of men and money, which it was necessary to make in order to please Cæsar, that earthly deity whose

smallest wish caused them to tremble. In all things, everywhere, the most trifling interests of earth superseded the thoughts of heaven, and the great Expectation, the blessed Hope with which the world was filled, was occasionally called to remembrance only by those whose occupations afforded them ample leisure. The Magi had studied man, and knew his natural propensities—but it was most probable that, learned and scientific as they were, they did not comprehend the individual in his afflictions, toils, and misery. They attributed to indifference what was but the necessary consequence of the labor and struggles which men experience in endeavoring to provide for their daily wants.

The Magi at last reached the great city of Jerusalem and perceived, by the silvery rays of the moon, the embattled towers and convex domes of the city of the kings of Israel. Then they alighted from their beasts and held council together.

After some discussion the eldest Wise Man said:

“We are approaching, no doubt, the end of our journey. When the gates of the city are opened we will question the inhabitants we meet. Doubtless they will be able to tell us where we can find the King.”

Preparing their tents, they camped that night close to the gates, and watched beneath the vault of heaven, in the vast expanses of which, though still a glorious sight, no extraordinary star was visible. In the morning the gates were opened. The Magi

had ordered that the first who should pass out should be brought to their tents—which, being done, they demanded of them where their new King might be found.

No one could answer this question. Others observed, contemptuously:

“King? We have no King! The friend of Cæsar is not our friend. He is a foreigner, who not only oppresses us, but treats our religious ceremonies with disdain. His impious mouth never opens but to utter blasphemy or issue some sanguinary order.”

“Our fathers suffered slavery,” rejoined others, “but they were far from Sion. They mourned, recalling the country from which they were separated, the beauty of which was engraved upon their hearts. It was ever before them, pictured as they had known it. But we, who are actually its inhabitants, do not recognize it. Have mercy, O God, upon Thy people!”

Great indeed, was the affliction of Israel, for many who were interrogated by the Magi answered in this sad and hopeless strain. Herod, in the interior of his palace, knew well the discontent and repining which surrounded him. He was vigilant in watchfulness. No event was allowed to pass unnoticed. His spies kept him faithfully informed of everything that transpired. It was, therefore, communicated to him that some strangers had arrived at one of the gates of the city during the night, and that, judging from their appearance and language,

they had come from a far distance. To sum up, they had inquired for a King, newly-born, whom they stiled the Salvation of Israel. At these words Herod was much troubled, and ordered that the strangers be brought before him.

The Magi obeyed the summons, and, with their numerous attendants, came to the palace of David, and into the presence of the tetrarch.

“We are seeking a King,” said the chief of the Magi, “Him whom the most celebrated of the wise men has foretold, saying, ‘A new star shall arise at His birth.’ That star we have seen in the East. Therefore we, being at Jerusalem, the city of kings, thought, O Prince, that the Saviour promised to our fathers might be within these walls. If we are mistaken, undeceive us.”

Upon this, Herod became speechless. His heart shook within him at such unexpected tidings, and he immediately summoned the Doctors of the Law that he might consult them. Even the name of this King which the Hebrews expected, and daily implored heaven to send, made him tremble with fear. His power was insecure; he knew how the people hated him, and was fully sensible that a spark might enkindle a raging conflagration in which he and his evil ambitions would be consumed—yes, that even the very slightest appearance of success would be sufficient to create a terrific revolt.

The Doctors of the Law assembled. They declared unanimously that the Messiah promised to the

earth was to be born at Bethlehem of Juda—which, on that account, although an unimportant village, was called “happy among all the towns of Israel.” Herod tried to conceal the fear with which these words inspired him, and spoke graciously to his guests.

“Continue your journey to Bethlehem, O wisest of men!” he said. “I ask for but one favor. Should you find this King—this Messiah, as you call Him—should you find Him, I pray you to bring me word, that I also may come and adore Him.”¹

And ordering the Magi to be escorted with great honors to their tents at the city gates, he bade them farewell. The Magi returned, accompanied by the officers of the king, and made ready for their departure. They said nothing, even to one another. The terrible look of the prince, and his words, mild as they sounded, seemed fraught with such evil meaning that grave apprehension had taken root in their minds.

Scarcely, however, had the officers of Herod left them when, to their intense joy, they saw the blessed star which they had seen in the east, shining before them. Saluting it eagerly, and following where it led, they traveled along the exterior walls of the city, and thence on to the road that led to Bethlehem. They paid respect to the tree of the prophet Elias, the mountains, the cheerful hills of

¹ St. Matthew ii, 8.

Rama, and the distant desert celebrated by the remembrance of Ruth and Booz.

They were nearing the town, when, to their astonishment they perceived that the star had stopped and now rested above a huge rock. Leaving their animals to the care of their servants, they ascended, on foot, a rough and difficult road, which brought them to the grotto.

The scene presented to their view was one to cause them to stand silent in amazement.

A young woman was seated in the straw, a little child resting on her knees. Both were more than ordinarily beautiful, but no special mark distinguished them. The Law had been fulfilled, the circumcision accomplished—the Son of God had submitted Himself to the common lot, rendering Himself in every way like other children. He lay before them in poverty and humiliation. Another child, the Precursor, tried to approach Him. An elderly woman, smiling, caressed the little wavering hands of the struggling babe. Two men were conversing near the entrance of the grotto, one elderly, one middle-aged, both grave and calm. The whole scene was primitive, simple. Grandeur had no place in it.

The Magi were confounded. What was this? What had they expected to find? What had they come to seek, from the remotest parts of the world? A King? And how could they recognize the One who had been so long the object of their search?

But the elder Wise Man, he who had seen and understood the misery of human greatness, he who had seen vileness clad in purple and fine linen, advanced now, and knelt in silence before this Child, worshiping Him.

And the Child turned His gaze upon them.

Ah, that look of God! Half-veiled as it was by infancy and humanity, yet it pierced the souls of these men, at once subduing them. They threw themselves upon their knees, lost in an ecstasy of wonder, love, adoration. And then, as if to reward them for their faith, the eternal hymn fell on their ears, celestial voices chanting the heavenly hosannas.

“Glory to God in the highest!”²

“O Light eternal!” exclaimed the Egyptian Wise Man. “Source of science, hope, and love, God, the Supreme Being! Time without end, uncreated Intelligence, who art, who wast, who shalt be! God, three times holy, powerful, and terrible, receive our homage and humble worship! Thou dost send Thy Son to regenerate the world, to propagate the light, of which it stands in such sore need! To admit man to the law of perfection, which governs him without his knowledge! Before Him the clouds will be dissipated, and the whole world will understand how small a number comprehended the mystery of the Fall, and the Redemption by the ordeal of suffering.

“Blessed art Thou, the Beginning and End of all

² St. Luke ii, 14.

things! My soul will cease to live solitary in a world of thoughts and sentiments which other men can not understand. My mind will no longer bear the burden. At Thy feet, holy Child, I cast all my earthly knowledge, Thou who comest to complete all knowledge. I desire to know, I desire to understand, no more. I have forgotten all in the presence of Thy divine infancy. For all time will I love Thee, and Thee alone. Thou alone art entitled to my love!"

The old Magi, who had experienced the nothingness of all things, had yet attained the love of Him who understands all things, and without whom all things are indeed nothingness. Tears coursed down his pale cheeks; but his heart became reanimated, as though a heavenly dew had fallen upon its parched surface. And when he had finished, the Wise Men placed the presents they had brought at the feet of the holy Child.

One offered Him gold, as to a King; another frankincense, as to a God. But he who had examined all so minutely, and who probably foresaw the future, being at the same time moved to tears, presented Him with myrrh, having mournful reference, it might be, to His death and burial. Once more prostrating themselves, with their faces in the dust, they withdrew. For three days they worshiped the holy Child, and departed to their own country, to declare to those who could understand them the mysteries of a God made man to save and redeem the world.

They did not journey through Jerusalem, for they

were warned in a dream not to revisit Herod. After their departure Elizabeth and Zachary also took leave of the Holy Family, returning to their home. The infant John seemed to realize their intent. With his tiny hands he clung to the manger in which Jesus rested, as if he did not wish to leave Him. Did this child, purified before his birth by the Saviour, already recognize Him of whom he was one day to say: "Behold the Lamb of God!"—He whom he had preceded into life, and was to precede into death as the morning star precedes the sun. Many, many years were to elapse ere these two, blessed servant and divine Master, met again.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

AFTER the Presentation and the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph and Mary decided to set out, at last, for Galilee, and their own beloved Nazareth. The sturdy Eleabthona carried Mary and the Child, while Joseph walked beside them, absorbed in thought.

The adoration of the Kings had not served to dissipate the dire forebodings roused in their hearts by their recent experience in the Temple, and since which both Joseph and Mary had been lost in painful reflections.

It was, therefore, with great relief that Joseph made ready for his journey. The incidents which had occurred had filled them both with sorrow. Simeon's words, Anna's prophetic utterances! Old and learned in the ways of the Lord as they were, their remarks had sunk deeply into Joseph's heart. He seemed to comprehend once more that every joy or gift of earth is dearly purchased. His own life before his meeting with Mary had taught him this. And now his complete happiness in her presence; his joy in the birth of the Child; his gladness at being chosen to be the protector and support of the Mother

without stain, and of the divine Son—all these, he felt, would exact their toll of sorrow.

This price he was willing to yield for his soul's sake, feeling that no sorrow could measure in depth the height of his happiness! But that Mary, daughter of heaven, given to earth to fulfil the loftiest destinies, was to pay for them so sorely, almost overwhelmed him. Anna the prophetess had said it; Simeon, the holy one, had asserted it:

“That soul so pure will be severely tried!”

These thoughts occasioned the protector of Mother and Infant the deepest melancholy as he now walked beside them. They were interrupted by a little cry from the Babe, who was hungry. As they had only arrived at the extremity of the valley of Raphaim, Mary alighted, and meeting herself at the foot of a bushy tree, in a spot which has since been called “the resting-place of the Virgin”—not far from the olive-tree under which Elias the Prophet stopped when he repaired to Jerusalem—she fed her little Son. The mournfulness which had overwhelmed her was for an instant appeased, for no one experiences the sufferings as well as the joys of the heart as does a mother. To hold her helpless baby in her arms, and see it drawing its life from her in sweet content is happiness unbounded for all mothers. What, then, was it for Mary, whose Child was her God!

Joseph, gazing at her serene and beautiful countenance, sighed heavily.

“What is the matter, dearest husband?” asked Mary, anxiously alert to every shadow on the face of her spouse.

He did not answer. Once more the Virgin repeated the question.

“I was reflecting, then, on the law of expiation,” Joseph answered, slowly. “First Simeon . . . then Anna . . . Mary, I fear that even you, in spite of your innocence and purity, will not be exempt . . . that even you—”

Mary started. Their thoughts had been the same, then! He, too, could not forget the words which had been uttered! Joseph did not finish his sentence. She clasped her Child more closely in her arms, and two great tears rolled down her cheeks. They fell upon the face of the sleeping Babe. Joseph had never seen Mary, the soul of tranquillity, in tears. He regarded her almost with terror. Mary, weeping—

“Oh, I do not wish to be exempt from the terrible law of expiation!” she exclaimed. “I am but a creature. I can not go to God save through life . . . and life entails the law of expiation . . .”

She was silent an instant, her eyes on her Babe.

“But the Son of God!” she exclaimed. “He who was, who will be, throughout eternity, the Being without beginning and without end—must He also undergo this? He who has left celestial habitations to take upon Himself our nature, to make atonement for all the crimes committed since the creation of the

world—must He be doomed to death, to suffering? O Joseph, it is this thought that overwhelms my soul with terror and pain and deprives me of all fortitude.”

And the tears sprang anew from those maternal eyes. Joseph was touched deeply, and turning away begged of God to mitigate the anguish which Mary was experiencing. Gradually her tears ceased to flow. She became calmer—and as the lateness of the hour forbade further traveling, she slept.

The evening was close at hand. The last rays of the setting sun gradually disappeared behind the mountain at the foot of which they were seated. In the distance rose those crimson ridges of Arabia, beyond the stagnant waters of the Dead Sea. The transparent, azure veil of an Eastern night had descended upon the Holy Family, and the faintest coolness was perceptible. Joseph, the ever-watchful, spread his warm cloak carefully over the Child and His Mother. Both slept in peace beneath its protecting folds, and he seated himself before them, watching them as if he were a sentinel on duty.

Some hours passed. Mother and Child slept on. But Joseph could not sleep. Leaning against a rock, he reflected upon the wonders of which he had already been a witness. Around him all was silent. Nature itself appeared absorbed in rest.

To watch when Nature seems to sleep! To contemplate, in silence, a world which is wrapped in silence, in which no eye beholds one but the eye of

God! What can inspire more fear, more confidence? One imagines one's self alone with one's Creator. One knows that in the great, encompassing desert no voice will respond to an appeal; that a cry of anguish will only stir the echoes.

Man has nothing to expect from man. But God—God is here.

The stars pursue their silent course, and the night itself seems illumined by this thought. Each star gains added brilliancy; the moon speeds, with swiftness and stateliness, on her appointed way. Not long since she was hidden in the foliage of the neighboring trees. Now she has passed her zenith, and is about to disappear behind one of the towers of Jerusalem.

The Lord abides here!

Who can doubt it? He is awake when everything sleeps—and Joseph humbled himself before the Most High.

“O my soul, why art thou uneasy? Banish all fear. Trust. Yield thyself, like an obedient child, into the hands of Him who is everywhere, whose kindness watches over the meanest of His creatures.”

And the night crept on, but in Joseph's heart calm resignation held its sway. In a transport of love and devotion, he worshiped God, and thus consoled, his weary eyelids drooped in the slumber he so sorely needed.

Joseph slept, his sleep so quiet and so peaceful that he was not alarmed at the vision which then ap-

peared before him; so light, so airy, so transparent that he seemed to see the stars glittering through those gossamer draperies. Exceedingly soft the voice that fell upon his ears; exceedingly gentle the words:

“Joseph,” he heard, “arise, and take the Child and His Mother, and fly into Egypt, and be there until I shall tell thee. For it will come to pass that Herod will seek the Child to destroy Him.”¹

The form seemed to melt away, the gentle voice died softly on the air, but in place of form and voice was left a fragrance which resembled the breath of the sweetest flowers of spring. Joseph awoke. He was not depressed or downcast over this strange command—no, his confidence in that God who was protecting them seemed increased a hundredfold. He woke the sleeping Mother.

“Mary,” he said, “an angel has appeared to me, saying ‘Arise, take the Child and His Mother, and fly into Egypt.’”

The soul of the Virgin had grown strong and resolute. The heart of the Mother was roused to protect that which was dearer than life itself.

“Let us start upon our journey,” she answered. “May the will of God be accomplished!”

The Child stirred in her arms. Joseph called little Eleabthona, feeding quietly near by. He put on bridle and saddle and fastened at her side their

¹ St. Matthew ii, 13.

scanty baggage, the only wealth they possessed. When these preparations were completed, they took the path over the mountain, carefully avoiding the approaches to Bethlehem. Notwithstanding the difficulties of the journey, they had crossed the road before the sun had risen on the horizon.

The first rays of the dawn, however, showed them a strange spectacle—a troop of soldiers marching along the heights. This surprised them, and they urged Eleabthona on. There was something terrifying to their hearts in that sudden, yes, that uncalled-for array of horsemen.

“God has not warned us vainly, Joseph,” said Mary. “Whatever chances, these men can not harm us. They whom God protects are free from all dangers.”

Joseph did not speak. The strong little animal answered bravely to his words of command. They were proceeding toward the mountain of Hebron; the soldiers had disappeared; the air was sweet with dew, the country about them wrapped in silence. Once more the anxious heart of the Mother grew calm. But suddenly a loud wail of terror, many voices blending as one, a moan of agony and despair, arose from the plain and woke the echoes. It was so unexpected, and so frightful, that Mary placed her hand on Joseph’s arm and they halted, chilled with horror, frightened at the fear and lamentation which came to them on the wings of the morning—the disconsolate cries of Rachel weeping over her

children—Rachel who could not be comforted since they had been torn from her.

“Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremias the prophet, saying: A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning: Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.”²

Mary, on the verge of unconsciousness, clasped her Son to her bosom. That grievous wail of terror awoke all the sorrows of her soul. The pain of those maternal hearts, of those afflicted mothers, seemed to set the sensitive chords of her own pure heart vibrating with dreadful agony. Joseph, saying nothing, hurried his precious charges toward the deserts of Hebron, while the Virgin lifted her soul to God, entreating comfort for those who were at that moment comfortless.

Herod, the cruel and wicked, was the cause of this terrible anguish. Understanding that the Magi had returned to their own land without coming to relate to him anything of what they had discovered, he soon realized that there must be some potent reason for their conduct. In his rage he conceived the diabolical scheme of sending soldiers to massacre all the children that were two years old and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding country.

“Then Herod, perceiving that he was deluded by the Wise Men, was exceedingly angry, and sending

² St. Matthew ii, 17, 18.

killed all the men-children that were in Bethlehem and in all the borders thereof from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the Wise Men.”³

But the hour had not yet arrived when the Son of God was to be delivered to the fury of mankind. They attempted His life indeed, in the sacrifice of so many innocent babes, but He was carried to safety by His Mother through secret paths, and the confusion and despair that ensued on the enforcement of Herod’s cruel order helped to cover His flight.

Happy Mother, carrying her Child and her Redeemer in her arms! The future has many sufferings in store for Mary, but God, who wishes her courageous heart to support them, has reserved for her the most exalted pleasures, that thus she may be fortified to suffer and endure.

³ St. Matthew ii, 16.

CHAPTER XIV

THE JOURNEY TO EGYPT

AFTER some days of anxious and cautious traveling along the most retired roads in the mountains of Judea, having passed the open plains after nightfall, and having concealed themselves for an entire day in the thick woods, the jaded wayfarers, tired out by their troublesome journey, at last reached Bersabee. Here they felt a little more secure—for a great distance now separated them from the soldiers of Herod, whose pursuit they had dreaded—and they stopped to enjoy a much-needed rest under the shade of those trees that grew near the sacred well, formerly the witness of the alliance between Abraham and Abimelech, king of Gerara.¹ Exhausted by fatigue, almost overcome by heat, Mary seated herself under the date-trees and cooled her face in the refreshing waters.

Nothing so beautiful had ever been mirrored therein—not even when they reflected the blushing countenance of Sara, confused in the presence of Abimelech, who, having restored her to her husband,

¹ Genesis xxi, 31.

said to her, with sorrow, "This shall serve thee for a covering of thy eyes to all that are with thee, and whithersoever thou shalt go,"² meaning, indeed, "Cover your face with a veil always, according to the custom of the country into which you are entering. Then those who look upon you will know that you are married, and so shall not regard you with affection."

The Virgin bathed the face and hands of her little Son in the limpid waters, and Joseph, loosing the strap of his sandals, dipped his weary feet in the cooling liquid. The few hours of quiet repose that followed did much to recruit their strength, and it was with renewed hope and energy that the holy travelers resumed their way at day-dawn, crossing the river by a ford which the fall of some rocks had rendered practicable. For two days they journeyed along its verdant bank, until they reached the country of the Amalecites.

Being free at last from all dread of the power or cruelty of Herod, they passed slowly over the peaceful country which had, in former times, been washed in the blood of so many cruel wars. Soon they entered the desert—that desert teeming even yet with the miracles of the Most High. Here was the well which had restored Ismael to life, in order that he might be preserved to be the father of a great people;³ farther on were the mountains of

² Genesis xx, 16.

³ Ibid., xxi, 18, 19.

Idumea, witnesses of the triumph of David; there was the road pressed by the feet of the Hebrews in their flight from Egypt, and who, for their disobedience, were condemned to wander for forty years in the scorching sands of Pharan, and to die without greeting the holy land which had been promised them. Joseph and Mary, overwhelmed by the silence and the thoughts that occupied them, exchanged few words. The time of rest had not yet arrived for either. The angel had ordered the spouse of the Blessed Virgin to take Mother and Child into Egypt. Until that was accomplished there could be no thought of rest.

Pursuing the road toward the east, they plunged deeper into the boundless desert. At every moment they feared to lose their way amid the yellow, moving clouds of sand—lofty, some of them, as billows of the sea lashed by a storm. The fatigues which they had hitherto experienced were slight indeed compared to the distress which they now encountered. They had avoided joining any caravan, always dreading pursuit and capture, and though the risk of traveling alone was great, it was the lesser of two evils. For the first few days they followed a track, on which the print of numerous footsteps served to guide them, but the horizon, far as eye could reach, was blank. The desert, vast and deep, was void of all that could direct them on their way. The wind arose, the dreaded hot wind of these terrible plains. It drove the sand before

it in whirlwinds. Every sign was obliterated. Cavities were filled up, hillocks were destroyed. How could they proceed? But how dared they, even if they could, go back?

Lost in the desert! Nothing around them but sand; not a tree to serve as shelter. All was desolate. At night they marched under the stars, endeavoring to find the road by the signs God had fixed in the heavens. In the day they slept beneath the shade of Joseph's cloak, wearily and fitfully.

One day—it was the ninth since they had been lost—they were even more oppressed. The sand burned their feet; the rays of the sun beat vertically down upon them, and the desert seemed interminable. Eleabthona was panting with exhaustion; they were on the last of their provisions, and their precious water was nearly gone.

Joseph halted the little animal, fearing that she would drop from weakness, and turned to Mary.

"It may be that we have been too cautious," he said. "Had we joined a caravan—"

"Take courage," said Mary, in her gentle tones. "We have obeyed the will of God—are we not sure He will protect us?"

Like balm the voice of Mary fell on Joseph's troubled heart. He helped her to alight from the faithful beast. The Child was carried in a basket that swung from the saddle and sheltered by a thick veil.

"Let us walk a little while," she said.

Joseph's head drooped.

"Mary," he said, huskily, "the Lord undoubtedly sees that with your wisdom and prudence you can do without me. He will guide you. Proceed on your journey. The provisions will last—"

"Nay," said the Virgin, smiling courageously, "what should we do without him whom God has appointed our protector?"

They rested in silence, Mary raising her heart to the Most High, Joseph anxious over the fate in store for Mother and Child. He felt that he was responsible for their safety, and his mind was filled with serious misgivings; for indeed he feared that God expected him to show greater wisdom and prudence in providing for them. With the coming of dusk they resumed their way amid profound silence. Suddenly Joseph seemed to perceive that the journeying was easier. He kept his eyes fastened upon the sand, saying nothing until he could be positive. Mary, with her veil thrown back off her face that she might the better breathe the cool night air, contemplated the starry sky, beyond which reigned the Lord God by whose hand the elements were controlled.

Thus they traveled into the night, Joseph growing more hopeful, till at last they found themselves at a small oasis in the desert, called by wandering tribes of the desert the "Well of Reward," a spot of refreshment, where one, arriving exhausted, regained courage and strength to finish his journey. For three

days they remained in this abode of quiet, enjoying the rest that was so sorely needed.

* * * * *

When the sun reddened the east behind the mountains of Idumea for the third time, Mary and Joseph set forth once more.

After four days' journey they came to the city, and there indeed found some of their people, who had been the victims of persecution in former times, and who now cordially welcomed them.⁴

A few exiled Hebrews received the humble family, and without knowing what guests had come to visit them, led them into the Temple. They had endeavored to recall to their minds their absent and beloved country, and with unskilled hands had kept in repair the temple which Orneas, expatriated like themselves, had erected to the Lord in remembrance of the Temple at Jerusalem. Here they sang the praises of the Most High. The holy Ark of Alliance was not there, but their souls were raised to God in true courage and sincerity. To reward them, great Jehovah sent the Desired of nations to dwell among them, to bless them in secret and wonderful ways, and to diffuse a holy virtue through the air they breathed. Their temple was an empty one, but

⁴The particular place where St. Joseph settled in this foreign land is probably Metaryieh, near Heliopolis, and about two hours distant from Cairo. Cf. Gigot's "Outlines of New Testament History," p. 56.

their prayers were from the heart. So the God of heaven accomplished in the midst of them that word, which, at a future period, He was to give mankind:

“For where there are two or three gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”⁵

⁵ St. Matthew xviii, 20.

CHAPTER XV

THE SOJOURN IN EGYPT

THE elders of the city showed Joseph a small cottage which chanced to be empty, and the field adjoining it, telling him that he might take possession of these while he cared to remain with them. During the first few days these truly charitable people helped the exiled family in all necessary things, and when there was finally some semblance of order, when the little cottage was cleaned and made ready, and the field partly sown, Joseph began to look about him for work at his trade. This was soon forthcoming. Mary, carefully concealing her miraculous maternity, gave up her days, even as she had at Nazareth, to the cares and duties of her humble station as the wife of Joseph the carpenter. She, whom the Wise Men of the East had come to visit; she before whom the angels of God had bent in homage; she who had given birth to the Son of God, and carried Him in her arms; she, the chosen one of all Israel, walked among the women of her race, as simple a woman as they, as devoted a mother. Many of her hours were spent among them. She washed her linen at the fountain as they did, and in

the evening, by the brilliant light of the moon, she spun wool and flax before her cottage door, and fashioned the tunics of Joseph and her Son. She had a pleasant word for all, conversing not of the wonderful favors God had bestowed upon her, but of the blessing which may be had by following His commandments.

Her example gave point to her counsels. Mary possessed extraordinary mildness, but her gentle manner did not lessen her influence. She was just in everything, but just with an amiable kindness, and her soul was full of that holy, heavenly affection which is often called charity, and sometimes sympathy, and which, in order to be of true comfort, must really feel and understand sorrow. The women of her neighborhood dearly loved her.

"In Mary we possess an angel," they said. "In her presence all trouble is changed to joy. Young as she is, she seems like a mother to all of us, superior to us in kindness and in virtue."

Though concealed in obscurity, yet her virtues betrayed her, revealing the true loftiness of her nature—as the beautiful violet, hidden by its leaves and shrinking from the gaze of men, may be discovered by its delicious perfume. Mary, hidden from the world, was the Mother of God. She adored Him. He was hers—He, the sovereign Lord of the universe—and the days went by in such ecstasy of joy that nothing in our existence can give us the faintest idea of her happiness.

Tears of intense rapture would fill her eyes as she gazed upon Him.

"Ah!" she would exclaim. "This beautiful One, this gentle Child, whose intelligence and sweet smile of affection would be the blessing of every mother! This Child, whom every mother envies me without knowing that He is anything more than the son of a poor workman and a simple woman! This Child is my God! This Child is the Sovereign of the world! This Child is the Master, the Creator, before whom all must tremble!

"O Intelligence of God! O Word of God! O Infinite Love! O uncreated Word made flesh, Thou art mine! This precious and dear life is entrusted to me! Before His birth into this world He was mine! I can kneel before my God at any hour of the day or night. What has happened? What wondrous law of love will govern this world since I, a weak mortal, carry in my arms that powerful God who struck with thunder the Levite Oza for having dared to place his hand upon the falling ark of the Covenant!"¹

And the holy Virgin humbled herself before this tremendous mystery.

Nor is this to be marveled at. Who among us can realize with what a feeling of adoration she looked upon her Son, and what delight she experienced at His slightest caresses? He whom the heavens can not contain was in her arms; He whom angels

¹ I Paralip. xiii, 9.

contemplated on bended knees slept upon her bosom, drew His life from her. And the first word which will issue from His lips will be the word Mother . . . and He will address it to her . . . to one of His creatures!

What heart would be capable of containing such joy? What heart could be sufficiently strong to hold such exalted happiness? It was necessary that God should prepare it. Weak humanity like ours would break under so great, so incomprehensible a favor. For the Virgin loved her Son as a Child, as a Father, as a God.

Yes, her heart would have burst under the intensity of such a love if God had not supplied her with the strength to endure it.

O Mary! Bestow upon us one drop, one single drop of that sea of love with which thou wert overflowing! It would help us to sing the praises of thy Son. Without thy assistance, beloved Mother, we feel ourselves unworthy to pronounce His holy name.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COMMAND TO RETURN

NOTWITHSTANDING the respect and adoration which Mary felt for the Word Incarnate, she fully comprehended the loftiness of her earthly mission. Humbly worshiping God, she knew that her Child needed a mother, like all other children of the human race. He had come upon the earth as a child; was weak with a child's weakness, helpless with a child's tender helplessness. In the sweet rapture of her virginal maternity, she watched over Him, uniting the modest innocence of the young girl with the lofty and sublime functions of the mother.

By a marvelous prerogative, and for the first and last time, the two mysterious and wonderful charms which constitute a woman's glory only when separated, were harmoniously united in Mary. She had the sweet innocence of the virgin with the lofty devotion and knowledge of the mother. She was, as a virgin, His chaste and holy worshiper, and, as a mother, His enlightened and prudent guide. In her heart she rendered Him the most fervent homage—and yet from her lips fell the words of love by which she spoke to Him of human life such as she, in her wisdom and innocence, understood human life to be.

She first uttered to Him the names which man ventures to bestow on the Almighty, for she conversed with Him in the language of man. She spoke to Him of the works of God—the sun, the stars, the earth and its beauties, and how Adam had named them in God's presence, although He who has created everything also knows everything. Childlike, He deigned to take from her the words to convey His thoughts, just as He had taken from her a body to clothe His divinity.

One day the Child pronounced the sweet and sacred name of mother in a low tone, like a bird trilling its first note of music, and again the equally sweet and sacred name of father. Listening to these words of earth on the sacred lips of Jesus, both Mary and Joseph experienced a foretaste of heavenly joys.

Little by little the Child uttered the name of every object about Him. If He gathered from the banks of the Nile the purple day-lily, or if, in His tiny hands, the Child caressed a bird or fondled the fawn of the tame antelope, His Mother must have listened with rapture as He repeated the names in the language of man. And her eyes would fill with tears at the sound of that voice which was, at a future day, to proclaim God's mercies to the world.

The day dawned when she spoke with Him of the bitter conditions upon which life—that inestimable gift—is granted to every creature. She conversed with Him on the fatigues, the harsh and difficult duties to which man is subjected, and she added—

but she spoke with tears, and with tears He heard—that man, for one crime, whose enormity weighed always upon him—was condemned to labor and to death.

“To labor and to death!” repeated the Child.

“To labor and to death,” said the Mother—the Mother of Him who had come upon earth to suffer.

They were silent.

Next day the Child followed Joseph, and asked to be taught His foster-father’s trade. Astonished at this request, Joseph sought Mary.

“To labor . . . and to death!” she echoed, softly. “He has heard . . . He submits.” Covering her face with her hands, she wept a long time.

It was after this that Joseph began to take the holy Child into his workshop. The foster-father of our Lord understood that Jesus, having become man, had subjected Himself, as man, to labor—until, alas! He should suffer death. Then was beheld a beautiful, an affecting sight—a God filled with all knowledge, placing Himself under a man—and a humble man and a Woman still more humble, being elevated even by their very humility, to the lofty dignity of commanding a God!

Behold Him as He stands under the shade of two palm-trees to which is fastened a long mat, made from the straw of the sesame, which Joseph had hung up in the morning to protect him from the burning Egyptian sun. The house, in the shape of

a beehive, casts its shade to the east, and from every side the eye may roam over fields sown with beans and barley, over rice fields intersected with canals to retain the fertilizing waters. The silent waters of the Nile are to be observed in the distance; green rushes, tall willows, huge sycamores are there, and beyond the Nile is proud Memphis, with its sphinxes, its gigantic symbols, its bold pyramids. Temples, palaces, and cities may be seen still further on in mere outline. The landscape is one of magnificent, glowing, splendid beauty, unknown to the colder west. And, by that very splendor, it draws attention to the simplicity of the scene nearer our eyes.

For Joseph, in the shelter of the little house, standing under the palm-trees, holds the plane in his hands, and directs the weaker hands of the Child. A thin shaving is planed from the piece of wood on which both are working. The Child is very serious. His mind already directs His actions, in spite of His tender age. He begins again; Joseph smiles at Him encouragingly.

Mary, seated near by, with her distaff and spindle, pauses occasionally in her own work to look at this dear and holy group, uniting with the angels in worshiping that God who thus voluntarily humbles Himself.

And thus did Jesus labor with Joseph at his daily toil, seeking ever some task and performing it. And when He had finished, when perspiration poured

down His cheeks, and fatigue overpowered His strength, He seated Himself beside His Mother, who dried His moist forehead with her veil.

Thus seated, the divine Lord contemplated that beautiful picture which seemed to stretch so endlessly before His eyes. He saw those places, which, at a future period, were to be inhabited by holy anchorites; He blessed now those mysterious deserts, in which so many saints were one day to gather and receive His spiritual influence. His celestial infancy scattered power through the water, the air, the palm-trees, and even the red sand which the wind blew, occasionally, against His cheek. And this spiritual power, this secret influence, was to inspire the first saints of the rising Church in this land which God, made man, had inhabited.

O sweet-scented banks of the Nile! O walls of Memphis! O winds of the desert! O sacred solitudes! Ye have seen the blessed steps of the spotless Virgin and the Desired of nations! The infant Saviour grew in strength near the verdant willows—praised be the trees that sheltered Him! The shadow of the pyramid guarded His sacred head—blessed be its shade! The solitudes beheld Him pass—happy solitudes! Playing, He made crowns of lotus-flowers from the waters of the Nile; fashioned rush hampers, and baskets with the leaves of the acanthus; plaited ornaments with the sesame grass. So are they ever blessed—the lotus, the willows, the acanthus, the sesame, the air, the water, the sand

of the desert! A holy breath blew upon them in the sweet days of its infancy, before sorrow had changed it into sighs. What wonder that the land of Egypt is still fertile, the waters of the Nile productive, the rushes green, the acanthus beautiful!

Nor need we be astonished that Mary was the only one of all the exiled Hebrews who dwelt in this land who did not regret her country. Her companions sang the song of captivity as it had formerly been sung in Babylon.

“Upon the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept: when we remembered Sion. On the willows in the midst thereof, we hung up our instruments. For there they, that led us into captivity, required of us the words of songs. And they that carried us away said: Sing ye to us a hymn of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?”¹

Mary regretted nothing. She enjoyed the happiness of the elect. She enjoyed the unbounded ecstasy of continual adoration and contemplation. She worshiped the Trinity thrice holy in that Son begotten of the Father, the marvelous filiation of which the Holy Ghost is the bond. And the more she loved, the more she was enabled to love, for love is increased and renewed by love.

* * * * *

The period in which Mary enjoyed heaven upon

¹ Psalms cxxxvi, 1-4.

earth was not of long duration. The angel reappeared with his second message to Joseph.

“Arise and take the Child and His Mother and go into the land of Israel; for they are dead that sought the life of the Child.”²

Mary knew that the mission of the Saviour was to begin in Israel, and although ever obedient to God’s holy will, her heart ached. Were, then, the days of peace, of joy, of security, already passed? She held her Son in her arms and wept silently. And He, who loved her, was deeply affected, for He was the best as well as the most beautiful of the children of men.

He wiped away her tears, and then placed both His soft young palms upon her closed eyelids. To the Mother this holy and gentle touch seemed to give her a powerful penetration. The past, as well as the future, stood before her like a vision of sorrow and unbounded hope.

* * * * *

Man came forth radiant and splendid from the Creator’s hands; his countenance was beautiful as the sun, but his soul was still more beautiful, being created in the image and likeness of God. He was happy, he was good, and his companion, given to him by God, equaled him in all his perfect gifts.

Humanity was called to the highest destinies; the

² St. Matthew ii, 20.

object of love, the being pleasing in the sight of an all-powerful Creator. It was a wondrous work.

And the Virgin, understanding, admired and praised God.

She admired the first mother of the human race . . . and even thought to feel as Eve must have felt in love for all the generations that were to come. Then she saw the angel of evil approach Eve; she saw the temptation and the fall.

Matter enshrouded the spirit. The brilliant universe became coarse and opaque instead of transparent and subtile. Man was driven from the garden he had polluted; clothed in flesh, condemned to sufferings, darkness, labor, and death.

And the Virgin, seeing, with tears admired and praised God.

Every soul had its hidden sorrow; every heart concealed its own weakness, its own faint recollection of heaven. Evil and good still struggled, but the good was everywhere conquered. There was no escape, no remedy. Men suffered in vain—they could not expiate the crimes of men. The righteous themselves were found wanting, and had to wait at the gates of hell till justice was satisfied. And Mary, gazing, already oppressed, felt that she would sink under this universal distress.

But she seemed to hear a voice; and these were the words it said:

“Be comforted, be comforted, My people! Righteousness and deliverance shall descend upon Israel.”

Then did the Blessed Virgin behold herself proceeding from the thought of the Most High, where she had been destined from all Eternity to be the tabernacle of the Word of God. And she saw that uncreated, all-powerful, creative Word passing through space to become incarnate. She recognized her Son, her dear Son, and thrilled with rapture. She heard the angels, who were singing what St. John announced in the after years:

“Behold the Lamb of God: behold Him who taketh away the sin of the world!”³

Weeping angels surrounded this most adorable Son. They brought the instruments of the Passion of the Redeemer. Mary contemplated His sufferings—His crown—the nails—the mockery—the vinegar and gall—the winding-sheet—the tomb.

And then she saw mankind redeemed. The weight of misery was taken away. Death was conquered. Sin was vanquished. Humanity, triumphant, regained a station so exalted that the saints of the New Law have dared to exclaim: “O happy fault!”⁴ when meditating upon the wonders of redemption.

The God-man, a potent conqueror, was seated in

³ St. John i, 29.

⁴ St. Augustine, Office of Holy Saturday.

His glory at the right hand of His Father, surrounded by blessed martyrs, triumphant saints, exalted virgins. The salvation of the world was accomplished, the Church established. The Sacraments continually caused that redeeming blood to flow from heaven to earth, purifying and sanctifying the whole human race until it should be transformed and spiritualized in God.

And the love of Mary toward her fellows was so excessive that, in a holy transport, she accepted a share in the sufferings of her well-beloved Son.

She knelt, with her Son still in her arms, and cried out:

“Behold the innocent Victim, the spotless Lamb presented to stripes! My God, let Thy justice be satisfied by His ignominy, sufferings, and death! But—let my soul at least be united with that anguish by which He is to expiate the crimes of earth. Do not separate the Mother from her Son in pain and suffering. And, in all things, may Thy holy will be accomplished toward Thy humble creature!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOLY FAMILY AT NAZARETH

THE Holy Family were about to depart from the hamlet in Egypt which had sheltered them. Though living in obscurity, they had won the love of all, so that each felt that he was losing something inexpressibly dear.

“Who will console us as Joseph has done? Who will give us the confidence that he has inspired? Who will speak so positively from the experience which a life spent in virtue gives?”

“Who will comfort us like Mary? Her very tones assuaged our griefs. She suffered with us, and we were happy in her tender compassion. Now will our sorrows descend on us once more with crushing weight.”

“And this lovely, this consoling, this serious Child, whose very presence sheds joy into our souls—who can replace Him?” ejaculated the mothers, the young maidens, the children, whose emotions outstripped their understanding. They had felt, in the presence of Jesus, that calm and great quiet which is to be found in the temple of God, close to the sanctuary. They could not give their reasons, but they knew that they loved Him with their whole hearts. A

Child He was, true, but amiable and tender, possessing a gentle kindness to which no other child could aspire. Childhood, in its ignorance and inexperience, is often hard-hearted, often cruel. But in His precious soul this Child already felt the sympathy of suffering. Every misfortune called forth His compassion, and if tears flowed in His presence, His divine hand wiped them away.

The friends and neighbors of this most Holy Family, losing three so well-beloved, felt intense and poignant sorrow. When the day of the departure arrived, every one wished to accompany them on their journey.

Some traveled with them for three entire days, even to the Well of Reward in the oasis, at which Joseph and Mary had halted before their arrival. They rested here for a little while and it was here that, with great reluctance, they separated.

"May happiness attend you wherever you go," said their friends, striving to control their emotion.

"May God protect and care for you and yours," returned the holy travelers, "and may you never forget His precepts."

"Forget!" echoed one. "If we forget those precepts which you have taught us, may our hands forget their duty."

And, in the words of Scripture, a second added:

"Let my tongue cleave to my jaws if I do not remember thee."¹

¹ Psalms cxxxvi, 5, 6.

The young girls who had come with them gathered flowers from the fountain, and having twisted them into fragrant garlands, placed them on the head and at the feet of the holy Child. This simple homage pleased Him, and smiling, He said:

“In spirit I shall always remain with you.”

They did not realize the sublime meaning of these words, but their souls were unaccountably moved, and on the homeward way they could discuss nothing but the Child, His manner, His charm.

“How His voice affected us! Did not your heart burn within you?”

“Did you notice His countenance? It shone like a star! Oh, I felt my heart throbbing in my breast as if it would break.”

There was silence, each thinking of what the Lord's words had meant to them. At last the eldest one spoke:

“We must ever bear these holy people in our minds. Let us try to recollect their kindnesses among us, and do as they have done. If we do not profit by their example we shall surely be guilty of sin,” he said.

Meanwhile, after long marches and harassing fatigue caused by the overpowering heat, Joseph and Mary, with the holy Child, arrived in their own country. They had had no news from their relatives.

“What has become of my sister?” Joseph asked himself many times. “Is she still at Nazareth? It

seems so long since we have seen each other. Her children will greet us with joy. . . . Our old servant—is he living? . . . And the garden I have cultivated with my own hands . . . in what condition shall I find all these?”

The nearer home they approached, the more disturbed Joseph became, filled as he was with anxiety for the welfare of the two precious beings entrusted to his care. From the top of the last hill they perceived Nazareth and its fertile plains, the mountains by which it is surrounded, and the sea into which the now setting sun seemed to be plunging. They were near the end of their long journey. In his heart Joseph mutely saluted the place in which he hoped to find quiet and repose. Surely they might rest here in safety!

They descended the mountain in silence. A return such as this after so prolonged an absence, brings thoughts that are distracting. The soul is alert to discover the traces of time long since passed by, and man is so little adapted for time that he can not measure it without a certain amount of fear. A voice within urges him ever forward, he beholds the goal, and flies toward it joyfully—but should he hesitate for a backward glance, he is frightened by the space that intervenes. So it appeared now to Joseph. The goal is near at hand, indeed, the haven of security. But they have been so long absent that doubt arises. In what condition will he find their home?

It was nightfall ere the travelers approached their own abode. The inhabitants of the village, tired by the labors of the day, had long since gone to rest. The narrow streets and narrower lanes were deserted. Changes had taken place since their departure, and these changes, though small, confused them. They would, perhaps, have wandered about for some time had not the instinct of faithful Eleabthona guided them. After several turns she stopped of her own accord before a ruined cottage.

Neither Joseph nor Mary recognized it by the light of the stars. The grass had grown upon its threshold; the beautiful vine which formerly shaded it had run in riotous profusion over its crumbling walls.

"Is *this* our home?" said Joseph, incredulously.

"It is indeed our home," returned Mary. "Eleabthona's instinct is more certain than our sight."

Joseph knocked and called in vain. No one answered. No one was there to answer. The old servant was dead. The younger one, having waited in vain for the return of her employers, had felt herself free from all responsibility. She had married, therefore, and departed with her husband four years before into a distant part of the country.

Mary and Joseph stood looking at each other, undecided what to do. Eleabthona, on whose back the Child slept, began to crop the grass that grew upon the threshold. In pulling a long twig toward her, the roots of which were entwined in the stones, she

shook the doorpost and caused it to fall suddenly. The door opened of itself, and Joseph and Mary entered.

But the inside was even more desolate.

The roof had fallen, and the abundant rains of the preceding season had penetrated through every part. Rank weeds and brambles covered the floor. The vine had thrown its slender branches in every direction and entwined itself wherever it could, finding a partial support in the sycamore-tree in the garden, which, in its turn, rested its thick foliage against the ruined walls. A number of birds had built their nests within; a stork and its young occupied what had formerly been the couch of Joseph. Ivy and long stragglers of periwinkle covered the walls with a green network.

On seeing this total confusion Joseph was greatly discouraged. The two holy travelers were physically tired, mentally depressed. A fallen rafter stretched near by and Mary sank slowly upon this, gazing about her in silence and then resting her glance upon her husband's countenance.

"What are we to do, my dear Mary?" asked Joseph. "We can not remain here, in this impoverished dwelling—"

"I have not seen the just forsaken, nor his seed seeking bread,"² answered Mary. "Is not the Lord at hand to succor us? Sooner would He

² Psalms xxxvi, 25.

change the stones into bread before us than leave us in distress."

Jesus had alighted from the docile animal, and had followed His parents. In the darkness His countenance shone with a beautiful glow and Mary turned her eyes upon Him who was her hope and joy. Putting His hand on Joseph's arm, He spoke the words that afterward came again from His divine lips:

"Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns: and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not you of much more value than they?"³

Joseph remembered the desert and was silent. For himself, this chosen and holy man had no fear. But for the two entrusted to his care he would have laid down his life, or borne any affliction.

"Consider the lilies how they grow: they labor not, neither do they spin. But I say to you not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed like one of these. Your Father knoweth that you have need of these things."⁴

Mary and Joseph exchanged glances; then falling on his knees, Joseph raised his eyes to heaven.

"O God of my fathers, if I have seemed troubled, or in doubt, or in uneasiness, Thou who knowest all and seest the hearts of men, know that I am not troubled nor doubting nor uneasy for mine own sake.

³ St. Matthew vi, 26.

⁴ St. Luke xii, 27, 30.

Rather is it because of the trust which has been bestowed upon me, that I would do all things as Thou wouldst desire me to do them."

A sweet smile played about the lips of Jesus as His foster-father breathed these words. Then, gently raising him to his seat upon the fallen stone, He knelt in turn, and with arms outstretched to heaven, began His silent prayer.

"This Child is the benediction of Israel," murmured Joseph.

"The peace of the Lord be with us," said Jesus. "Should those who love Him doubt Him? Love—and all will be given you."

Then Joseph, strengthened by the prayer of Jesus, found courage to begin the work of reconstruction and in a short while restored the house to something like its former condition.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PEACE OF NAZARETH

NOW the other Mary, with Cleophas, her husband, and their children, had arrived at Nazareth a few days before, and finding the home of Joseph and Mary in so wretched a condition, had sought another domicile. They had just journeyed from Mesopotamia, where they had sold all their goods, previous to settling in Galilee. The report that the Holy Family were in Nazareth soon reached the ears of their kinsfolk, and they hastened to visit them and rejoice over their return.

Joseph was more than happy to see his beloved sister.

“God be blessed, dear Mary, that He has united us upon this earth,” he said, affectionately. She returned his caresses, and clung to him, and he added, in a lower tone of voice: “Though I were to thank God forever, I could not praise Him sufficiently for the task He has given me. It is now accomplished.”

Mary’s inquiring glance was bent upon him, but her lips framed no question.

“Your sister Mary,” he continued, “will one day merit the respect and homage of the entire earth.

Should the Lord call me to Himself, I ask that you take my place, to watch over her and her Son."

Mary and Cleophas listened to their brother in astonishment, not having the clue to his words—and then they saw their children, James and Jude, with one of their young companions, named John, approaching Jesus. John was a beautiful child, with a heavenly countenance. When he saluted Jesus he knelt on the ground before Him, while James and Jude stood close to Him, gazing upon His face with awe and reverence.

"What is this?" exclaimed Cleophas and his spouse, almost in the same breath. "The sight of this Child stirs our very souls with a trouble that is half-pain, half-sweetness. Look at our boys! They tremble! And John, the son of Salome, who kisses His feet, and weeps as if for very love!" They were silent. Then, turning to Mary, who now stood at Joseph's side, regarding, with him, the touching scene before them, the woman placed her hand on Mary's arm:

"Is what we have heard . . . true?" she asked.

Quietly, and with admirable simplicity, the holy Virgin related the miraculous events of the birth of Jesus, as well as those which had preceded, and those which followed it. She told of the visit of the shepherds; of the Magi; of the flight into Egypt, commanded on the day that Herod had caused the male children of Bethlehem and its environs to be slain. The report of the massacre had indeed

penetrated to Nazareth, and made all tremble, but they were ignorant of its cause.

Hearing these wondrous things, Cleophas and Mary, with their children and the young and beautiful John, prostrated themselves before the divine Child. They adored Him, these three who were to be His followers and Apostles.

Salome (who had been a companion of the Virgin in the Temple) when informed by her son John of the return of Mary, and the wonderful story which was told of her and Jesus, came in turn to see her. Salome was, like her son, of a loving and tender nature. So may we contemplate Jesus in the little house of Nazareth, surrounded by hearts which were filled with love and devotion toward Him. Already were His words listened to with respect. His discourses reached sublime heights. Mary, observing these things, thought that the time of His mission was approaching. Dreaded epoch! She could only prepare herself for it by redoubled prayers, by good works, by renewed submission to the will of God—asking one thing more than all others—that increase of sorrow might find her possessed of the strength that she had had in the days of her happiness. In her humility she was well aware that each soul conceals mysteries unknown to all, even to itself—mysteries of strength or weakness with which occasion alone can make us acquainted.

She prayed for herself as if she had been a poor, **weak woman**. She prayed for the world. Her love

embraced all that her Son loved—and who could fathom the depth of that divine love—the love of Him who came from heaven to suffer death, in order to save us?

With her return to Nazareth Mary began once more her usual humble duties. She cared for her home, attended to the wants of her holy spouse and her divine Son, and often conversed with Jesus on the sufferings of fallen humanity, which God, in His great mercy, had never ceased to love. The sorrows of the earth, even the visible sorrows of those around them, spoke to these united, devoted hearts. Sin had brought grief into the world, and they, hating sin and loving the sinner, were moved to tears.

Often, on returning from the town, whither she repaired to help some unfortunate who had appealed to her or to console another in affliction, the Mother would sit beneath the shade of the great sycamore, and cover her eyes with her hand as if to shut away from her the sight of so much woe.

“O world of anguish!” she would exclaim. “O world of sorrow! What moans escape from thee!”

And Jesus longed to suffer, in order to help these and all the unknown tragedies of human life, which vibrated through His heart even as our sighs now re-echo through the vaults of heaven and reach His pitying ears. Even thus were they fulfilling their adorable mission. Already was Mary the Mother of the Afflicted, the Consolation of those in pain. And her Son, in spite of His tender age, was even

now that God of infinite love and mercy who died for His creatures upon the wood of the cross.

Some years elapsed without any exterior events of importance, years filled with peace and tenderness, yes, and preparation. Joseph grew older—but his heart was at rest. He had fulfilled his mission. The Child and His Mother were safe within the shelter of their home; his hands were still able to furnish their daily sustenance. Everywhere the world delivered itself up to unbridled passions. Iniquity reigned triumphant in the courts of men. Not knowing that heaven reigned . . . here . . . in this obscure corner of the globe. That a divine life was here being lived that would heal the shameful wounds of sin and misery. Jesus and Mary, Joseph, his sister Mary, Salome, and the young children, the unknown hope of the future—spent their days in apparent monotony, which was interrupted only by the prayers which every Hebrew was accustomed to make in the Temple at the epoch of the great festivals.

Time of silence and expectation! In which the Lord increased upon the horizon of humanity! With what joy the trembling earth saluted Thee! How the just rejoiced to see Thee born at last! How Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph hailed Thee from that place of expectation in which they invoked Thy coming! How the angels who watched over men blessed Thee! For they beheld their hope increase, and saw the beginning of all those joys which they had been promised by the Omnipotent.

CHAPTER XIX

JESUS IS LOST AND FOUND

JESUS had just completed His twelfth year, and the Feast of the Passover was near at hand.

Accompanied by their friends and relatives, Joseph and Mary set out for Jerusalem, taking their Son with them for the first time—and this in order to comply with the rules which ordained that, when he attained the age of twelve the young Israelite became a son of the Law. He could share in the ceremonies of worship, and had to go up to Jerusalem three times a year.

These voyages across Judea were frequent. The Passover and other obligatory festivals could only be celebrated in the Holy City, so that every Hebrew had to journey there. Those who dwelt in the confines of the land of Israel were no more exempt than those who lived in the suburbs of Jerusalem. Performed on foot or on slow-moving beasts of burden, a voyage of this sort was extremely long. But what mattered it in these beautiful climates where life was spent more or less under the vaults of heaven? Did not the charming feasts of nature, ever rich and fruitful, form part of the celebrations to which God invited His people?

The Israelites left their homes in the springtime; when the sun made the days magnificent without rendering them scorching; when the nights were sown with stars, and when the balmy meadows clothed themselves in beauty to meet their Creator. Setting out amid such loveliness, the pilgrims started from all points of Judea, and marched in troops to Jerusalem. The caravans often met when they halted near the fountains; and the people, exchanging the kiss of peace, would set up their tents for the night. The young men, going to the well, raised the stone that covered it, and filled the pitchers of the maidens, whose grave and mild deportment eminently befitted the traditions of their race. Beautiful as Rebecca and modest as Ruth, they returned to their mothers without having, apparently, listened to the flattering speech of the young strangers. Nevertheless, both parties met again at the same fountain, and when these meetings were renewed several times it almost invariably happened that the parents were induced to talk of and arrange a marriage.

Under the tents the conversation was more serious. The topics there were the oppression of the people, the libertinism of the governor's court; the harassing taxes and sufferings under which the God of Israel allowed His chosen to suffer. The old men spoke of the approaching harvest, expressing their fears that it would be bad, or talked of a probable war, and other subjects of uneasi-

ness. Old age is prone to see calamities that never occur.

Presently the voices of the young girls would sound forth in the evening hymn. From a distance the young men responded to it. Little by little the fears, the predictions of disaster, the perils and fatigues of the day, as well as the hopes and aspirations of the young men, and the timid emotions of the maidens, were softened and lulled in the last prayer, to which repose succeeded. On the following morning both parties separated, and in the evening exchanged the same kindness and courtesy with other strangers.

Thus it was that the Hebrew people formed but one vast family, united under a beautiful sky, and singing the praises of God even in the deserts. At last they would arrive at the Temple, and however great might be its splendor, with whatever beauty it might shine, they had seen far greater pomps and a more beautiful spectacle among the mountains. They had seen the glorious sun plunging into the sea, its rays sparkling on an ocean of flame. They had seen the moon cast a shimmering veil of silver over the solitudes of Gerara; or again they had watched, awestruck, the lightning flashing about the top of Mount Hermon.

Oh, how small, how weak, how trivial is man, when he strives to compare his poor splendors with those of the Most High! The only value they possess is the intention with which they are erected.

On approaching the Temple, the travelers found

its porch, its porticoes, its courts, filled with an immense multitude, who had come to Jerusalem from all parts of Judea. There an entire nation, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, the happy and the miserable, were united with one sole thought—that of adoration.

The year in which Jesus accompanied Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem, saw a greater crowd of people than had ever before attended one of the Hebrew feasts. The cause of this was the rumor that had spread and died away and spread again, concerning the birth of the Messias. Many Israelites hoped to gain some news of Him during these solemnities.

Many, in fact, said, "The Christ is here, the Christ is there!" Some even added that shepherds had saluted Him at His birth: others that kings had come from the East to adore Him. But as they expected a glorious and triumphant Christ, whose breath alone would serve to reduce their oppressors, the Romans, to the dust, they would never have been able to recognize Him in His obscurity, hidden in the throng with Joseph and Mary, who had come, not to boast of the glory which God had bestowed upon them, but in silent humility to pay homage to the Most High.

After the seven days of the solemnity, when they had offered a sheaf of barley, the first produce of the new harvest; when they had eaten the unleavened bread, as a symbol of the purity of their hearts; when the lamb without blemish had been immolated,

and they had partaken of it standing, among their friends and neighbors, with their loins girt like travelers—then did Mary and Joseph and those of their town who had accompanied them, set out for Nazareth, going by the gate of Ephraim and the high road, which was filled with crowds of people returning to their homes.

They formed a numerous troop—so numerous that Joseph and Mary were separated by a caravan returning to Jaser, beyond the Jordan. These boorish people passed through and dispersed the band with a lack of civility very uncommon in those days of festival, in which the Hebrews lived like brothers. Mary was in front with Salome, Cleophas, and others of her neighbors. Jesus was not with them, and noting the fact, Mary was uneasy about Him until Cleophas assured her that He was with Joseph. She believed him, and continued her journey.

The stars were so bright and the air so fresh that the travelers were determined to cover as much ground as possible, so they did not stop at the usual hour. At last they halted near the springs of Galaad. What, however, was Mary's consternation when, on seeing Joseph, who now joined her, she found that Jesus was not with him. She called Him, she sought Him all through the assembled troop, but in vain.

"Has no one seen my Son?" she cried.

Nobody had seen Him. She waited until the day-dawn, and then she and Joseph examined every group, visited every tent.

“Has no one seen my Son? Can no one tell me where is Jesus?”

No one had seen Him, no one could give them any tidings. A mortal terror seized upon the Mother, and Joseph shared it.

“What can have become of Him?” exclaimed the bystanders one to another in real anxiety, and Mary grew pale as she murmured:

“Has the hour arrived?”

The mission of the Saviour! Its perils were already in her mind. She trembled, and her soul was shaken to its depths with dread.

They went back to Jerusalem. What a journey that was, filled with anguish for father and mother! They inquired for Jesus along the road, knocked at every cottage, spoke to every one they met: Jesus, a young Child, the most lovely of all children . . . such was He whom they sought. Some had remarked Him on His arrival, and recognizing Him from the description given of Him by His parents, exclaimed:

“That beautiful boy? Oh, what a pity if any misfortune has befallen him!”

One or two spoke of a furious bull that had broken loose in the city the preceding evening, and had injured several before he had been killed—so prone is man, by a secret instinct of misfortune, to seize the worst side of every event and magnify its dangers.

They took a day, a night, and the half of another day to return to Jerusalem across the shelving roads

which they had descended with such rapidity. What unhappiness preyed upon the minds of Joseph and Mary during these uneasy hours!

At last they arrived. But where were they to seek for the Child? They inquired for Him from the guards, from the gatekeeper, from all they encountered. None had seen Him. None could give any tidings of Him. They went to the house in which they had lodged during the festival. All remembered Jesus too well to have forgotten Him, but none had caught a single glimpse of Him.

Then Mary, so filled with sorrow that she could not speak, motioned to Joseph that they should turn toward the Temple. And there they went, afraid, and dreading the denials which they felt awaited them. With palpitating hearts they entered. The vast galleries were deserted. No sound was heard save that of their footsteps upon the pavement. They passed through the porch of the Gentiles, and advanced under the open porticoes of the Israelites. Everywhere the same silence reigned.

They were about to penetrate farther, in order to interrogate the priests, when, from the bottom of the immense and magnificent porch of the Hebrews, they heard a voice! O voice a thousand times blessed! A thousand times delightful to the ears of that Mother! It is the voice of her Son, of her Beloved! Trembling, Mary sank upon her knees.

Returning thanks to God, and regaining strength in prayer, Mary rose, after a while, and she and

Joseph approached nearer the spot from which the tones of Jesus issued. Concealed by a pillar of porphyry inlaid with gold, which hid her from the sight of all, she contemplated her Son.

The divine Child, far more beautiful than are the angels of God when they are permitted to take human form in order to appear to man, clothed in a simple white tunic, His head crowned with the glory of His golden hair, His countenance calm, His appearance inspired, was standing in the midst of the Doctors of the Law. Those who listened were seated in attitudes of rapt attention. He questioned and spoke with such force and such authority that they were confounded with admiration.

The Virgin heard Him interrogate Malaleel, surnamed the Ram, on account of the elevation of his genius; Tobias, so called for his benevolence; Joseph of Arimathea, styled the good rich man; Nicodemus the Pharisee, and a great many others. They seemed lost in amazement, comprehending for the first time how weak were their ideals, how imperfect their virtue compared with the high ideals and sublime virtue which this Child required: "Be ye therefore perfect as also your heavenly Father is perfect."¹ They were silent before Him.

How filled with grace the Son of God, whose glance penetrated the secrets of highest heaven! Joseph and Mary listened with holy recollection.

¹ St. Matthew v, 48.

The Blessed Virgin had indeed heard such words in the secret recesses of her own pure soul, but never had they been expounded in human speech.

And then, when He had finished, He turned and left the Doctors so quietly that they did not note His departure. They sat meditating upon the truths which He had laid before them, speaking as one in authority. The divine seal was upon Him and His countenance glowed with superhuman intelligence. Mary and Joseph left the pillar and advanced to meet Him, amazed, feeling their own nothingness in the presence of His majesty. With humble tenderness Mary spoke to Him:

“Son, why hast Thou done so to us? Behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing.”²

Joseph, too, gazed on that lovely countenance with questioning eyes.

“How is it that you sought Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?”³

Mary felt a curious trembling seize upon all her limbs. For the first time it was her God who spoke. The ties of earth had disappeared. He had spoken of His Father . . . His heavenly Father. Mary and Joseph were filled with wonder. The Virgin Mother looked at Joseph.

“They understood not the word that He spoke unto them. . . . And His Mother kept all these words in her heart.”⁴

² St. Luke ii, 48.

³ Ibid., 49.

⁴ Ibid., 50, 51.

CHAPTER XX

THE DEATH OF JOSEPH

JESUS returned with His Mother and His foster-father into Galilee. During the journey He was their docile, loving Child, and no change was apparent in the manner of the Holy Family. Nevertheless, both Mary and Joseph looked upon Him in a new light. To Mary her Child was now her God preparing to suffer, and her tenderness for this dearly-beloved Son became a heartache in her maternal breast.

As for Joseph, he contemplated Jesus with respect and dread, notwithstanding the affectionate intercourse which was habitual between them. For he felt—did this most just and righteous man—that his foster-Child was indeed the Son of the God of heaven, and often he covered his face in His presence, as did Moses near the burning bush of Oreb. But he was upright of heart and God loved him as one of His most faithful servants.

“And,” he thought often, “if I cannot look, without fear, on the divinity concealed under human guise . . . how, how shall I be able to appear before my Creator when He shall call me hence?”

Jesus did not abandon him who had watched beside His cradle, under whose authority His infancy had been passed, and whom He loved with a tender and filial affection. The hour was at hand, indeed, when Joseph was about to leave this world, and as that hour drew near, Jesus, the Son of God, was at his side. By voice, and glance, and touch He encouraged the soul of His adopted father, so that death lost all its terrors.

“How lovely is this passing!” exclaimed Joseph. “What joys are mine! The heavens open! Those heavens have been rent asunder to rain down the Word made flesh, and now heaven and earth are united by an indissoluble tie. It is the Christ, the living God, who unites them. The angels, the thrones, the dominations encompass us, for the King of glory is present. His feet are upon the earth, but His forehead touches the heavens. I shall be able to go from Him to His Father forever. O Death, where is thy victory? O Death, where is thy sting?”¹

And Joseph looked from the face of Jesus toward heaven, from heaven toward Jesus. Life was quitting its earthly tenement, but sorrow and dread had no part in this dissolution. The holy Virgin, anointing, according to the custom, the limbs of the dying man with perfumed oil, could not restrain her tears. She was bidding farewell to one who had been her

¹ I Corinthians xv, 55.

prop and stay, the companion of her days, good and bad, the faithful friend, the sharer of her glory and her grief. Nevertheless, wiping the tears from her loving eyes, she murmured:

“Go forth, my beloved spouse and friend! Enjoy happiness in the bosom of Abraham. Thy day is finished. It is full as the day of the diligent vine-dresser. Rejoice, dear Joseph, son of Jacob, son of David. God calls thee to Himself. Go! Receive thy recompense . . . and let us sorrow who lose in thee a dear friend, and one whose speech was affectionate and wise. But, Joseph, we shall meet again—since we have lived in the same hope and rejoiced therein.”

The other Mary and her sons, and Salome and her children surrounded the couch of the dying man who had been so long their dear and trusted friend.

“The Lord has conducted the just through the right ways and showed him the kingdom of God,” they sang. “He has exalted him like a cedar in Libanus. Courage! Enter upon the road to eternal life. Return to the heavenly city where thy name is enrolled, for thou hast been chosen to be one of its inhabitants.”

And Jesus, pointing toward Joseph, said:

“Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.”²

The eyes of Jesus were suffused with tears, for

² St. Matthew v, 8.

suffering human nature ever awoke a response in His gentle heart.

Joseph breathed his last in the arms of Jesus and Mary, with those he loved about him—and this death, filled with all kinds of consolation, was the reward of a life so humble and so hidden that we know it only through the light which has been shed upon it by Mary and Jesus. Before he—the just one—was chosen to be their support and guide, he lived in obscurity. His mission accomplished, he died in obscurity; like those stars which only shine when they approach the sun, and are lost, apparently, when they no longer reflect its rays.

But while this planet swings within its orbit the name of Joseph shall be held in reverence. St. Joseph, guardian of the Holy Family, pray . . . pray for us!

CHAPTER XXI

THE RETIRED LIFE OF JESUS AND MARY

AFTER Joseph's death Mary lived in a still more solitary fashion. One occupation now absorbed her—prayer.

She prayed continually. She invoked God, and asked Him not to permit any of the sufferings her Son was about to endure to be lost to mankind. She did upon earth what she has always done in heaven since she left this earth: interceded incessantly for us all. Her prayers were of great value, embracing as they did the past, the present, and the future.

If one among us has received any signal grace; if one of us has obtained the conversion of a dearly-loved father or mother; if the story of the prodigal son has been enacted within our own family; if we have redeemed one we love from spiritual loss—who knows? That victory may have been achieved for us during these tremendous days when Mary raised her suppliant hands to God, demanding, perhaps, and obtaining these favors for us. She kept the world and its people ever present in her maternal heart. We are present there to-day, with all our needs.

As for Jesus, from the time of His return from the Temple, His life was quiet and reserved. He went often to the mountain, near which the angel had revealed the mystery of the Redemption to Joseph. There He passed days and nights, His soul elevated to His heavenly Father, invoking Him for us. For us, who, alas, were to respond so ungratefully to His immense love!

And when He descended among men it was to converse with those whom He had chosen to be the Apostles of His word; with James and Jude, who are called His brothers; with the sons of Zebedee, among whom John was loved with a peculiar predilection for the incomparable beauty of his soul; with Simon and Andrew, two young fishermen of Bethsaida, but oftener with John, the son of Elizabeth and Zachary.

John had but lately come from the desert, where he had lived after the death of his parents. On the banks of the Jordan he had already preached the baptism of penance unto the remission of sins. His voice was heard crying aloud in the desert: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Make straight His paths!"

And Jesus blessed the efforts of His Precursor.

During this period of universal expectation, Jesus and Mary dwelt in holy solitude, occupied only in preparing for the future, and in sowing among the chosen flock the living and true word which later was to spread over the earth.

CHAPTER XXII

A SINNER

WHILE Mary praised God in the silence of Nazareth, and her beloved Son prepared Himself for the mission which was to save the world, that world delivered itself more and more to shameful and culpable passions. Never had unbridled license gone such lengths; never had manners been so depraved. Rome, the proud, looked up to by all nations, was plunged into every species of iniquity and vice. The empire of the gods had fallen. Man was without belief, without any restraint save that which tyranny imposed upon him, without any hope here or hereafter. From nothing he came, to nothing would he go—let Pleasure reign, therefore, the sole and only object of existence!

So infamous debauchery degenerated, on the part of the rich, into atrocious cruelty, and on the part of the poor into frightful brutishness.

“The gods have indeed deserted us,” cried some of the elders, terrified at the scenes which were taking place around them. For since the world’s imperial city had given welcome to the gods of every nation, the people no longer believed in any. If they paid

them homage it was more as a flimsy excuse for immodest festivals, disgusting saturnalias—proving, by a rigorous logic, tested by every age, to what the abolition of belief infallibly leads.

The women also—those Roman women who had for so long a time given examples of virtues the most rigid—threw off restraint. They paraded the most frightful depravity, imitating and surpassing that which Greece had first shown to the world. Corruption the most barefaced reached its climax in this sex upon which rests the hope of every nation, to whom nature and nature's laws prescribe modesty and chastity.

This dreadful pestilence of evil gained ground more and more, and threatened to spread itself into Judea—since this unfortunate country had been subjected to foreign kings, the crowned slaves of wealth whose eyes were ever fastened on the imperial city in order, by a servile imitation of the master, to set the pace for their own evil conduct.

Cruelty and corruption reigned in the palace of Herod Antipas, effeminate successor of Herod the Great. Encircled by a set of dissolute Roman youths, every luxury, every pleasure, was enjoyed, imitating, at a distance, the expensive caprices of Rome. He endeavored to gain the affection of the people by enervating feasts, so that, little by little, the ancient manners of the cities of the kings of Judea disappeared, and the flood of evil threatened to swamp even the believers in the true God.

The hatred which many nourished for the Tetrarch was their safeguard against the vices he strove to introduce, and the expectation of the coming God was the secret hope of many others. At the court of the governor alone the giddy mass of the people, the strangers without a country, the haughty and pampered crowd which abounds always in great cities, gave themselves to those dangerous pleasures which religion and right living forbid. Intoxicating feasts, scenic games, all that might excite the senses, had but lately been introduced into Jerusalem. Extreme civilization and extreme depravity are akin—they reach the same point by opposite roads, but their end is pleasure and carnal enjoyment. Herodias and Salome, her daughter, surnamed the Dancer, had introduced the manners of the Roman court into the ancient palace of David, polluting it. And some women of Jerusalem, forgetting the Lord and His Laws, as well as His promises, had deserted the touching ceremonies of the worship of the Hebrews. Their feet were set in the path of the wicked, and they lived in the midst of these disorders, drinking iniquity like water, and exulting in their sins.

One day, however, the most sought after and most beautiful of these women, who was surrounded by the profound homage of the court of the Tetrarch, abandoned these feasts, these mad joys and tumultuous pleasures, and retired into Galilee, near the Lake of Tiberias, upon whose verdant shores she possessed a delightful villa called Magdala.

It may have been caprice, or disgust, or ennui. For she was beautiful, of illustrious birth, and the possessor of great wealth. She had never married, nor would she, knowing no other master than her own whim. She had great intelligence; her knowledge of the arts, and her poetical talent—so rare in those days—equaled her physical charms.

Naturally, a crowd of idle young gallants followed her into Galilee, and here she led a luxurious life, far different from that of the other daughters of Israel. The strangers, especially the Romans, made her a sort of goddess, because she alone in this land, where manners were still chaste and humble, recalled to their minds the luxury, the light and elegant customs of their own city.

But all were alike unfortunate. For whether she listened to their flatteries or spurned them, whether she accepted or repulsed them, no one found a moment's peace in her society. Her caprice and her inconstancy gave them no rest. She had adopted, all believed, the sect of Epicurus, represented in Judea by that of the Sadducees. Often she would exclaim:

“Life is short! Life is uncertain! Let us make life as happy as we can.”

So she spent her days in seeking new pleasures, in inventing new sports. And none reached the satisfaction she had planned. She was tired too soon. Fatigue, ennui, disquietude, shattered her enjoyment. Obstacles, difficulties, unattainable desires

rose before her, attracting her by their remoteness. No matter what she obtained, no matter at what cost, the charm which distance had lent was lost, and so she ever craved something new.

This vague and mysterious unrest, this purposeless agitation, this disease of the soul, had disgusted her with the palace of Herod. Even license had become monotonous, therefore had she fled.

Now, under the lovely heaven of Galilee, in a garden of delight, whose beauties were reflected in the silvery waves that caressed the shores, she rested, amid followers who were obedient to her every nod. She had gathered all that might flatter the senses or charm the mind, and yet . . . she was not satisfied.

Stretched on soft cushions, clothed in light tissues of silk and gold, with arms, head, and neck ornamented in the Roman style, she sang to those who were her slaves and courtiers, accompanied by the sweet strain of the seven-stringed lyre but recently introduced from Greece. Or at evening she rendered the dances of Ionia, with a languishing softness that ravished the eyes. Those who beheld her in these exquisite poses acclaimed her loudly, praising her, and declaring her to be the most beautiful and charming of all women. Without doubt they believed her to be so, and thought her happy. Perhaps there were many who really envied her.

Yet, letting fall the sistrum, the lyre, and the sambuca, despising the joys that had just delighted her,

disgusted with the vain applause of these flatterers, she hastily broke from them, and whole days elapsed before she again appeared, tormented anew by her desire for the unattainable, for pleasure, joy, satisfaction.

Nothing light or frivolous would then please her. She would seek out the most austere men, and begin, and keep up, a discussion, serious and intelligent, to which even profound minds would listen with attention. Thus were her charms so varied and so capable of attracting people of every age that she was actually worshiped. All adored her, all desired to be loved by her.

But she formed no attachments. At one time she was gay, even foolish; at others sedate, even melancholy. Her desires were immense, and nothing could satisfy them. Her soul sought everything and found everything void. She might have loved, indeed, had she found a being that could hold her interest. But of those whom she met none understood her heart—a heart which she did not understand herself. Man wishes to find life in that which he loves. This woman, drawn into the turmoil of a corrupt world, found death and death only in these degraded souls.

Seeking the happiness that fled from her, she plunged into the excesses of the Roman women. These Romans feigned to honor Venus and her impure mysteries. They could invoke this deceitful apology for all their lewdness, but this woman of

Magdala had no such excuse. She believed in nothing. She lived without any God. She jeered at fate.

“Everything is false. Men are false. Women are false. Heaven is empty. Life is empty. So with my heart. It, too, is false and empty.”

Thus lived Mary of Magdala, the most beautiful woman of her times. Thus was she when she first heard of Jesus.

His rigid morality, His virtues, His superhuman beauty, His sublime knowledge—all were topics broached to interest this tired creature. Report had it that in His infancy He had confounded the Doctors by His wisdom, and that the people were following Him from afar to hear His words. Those who told her were young men, who laughed at the severity of His morals, and who endeavored to turn them into ridicule.

But Mary of Magdala did not laugh with them. This singular virtue impressed her. An innate taste for the sublime, which all her immoralities could not efface, compelled her to admire that which she could not understand.

She listened to the story of His solitary life, His unrivaled beauty, His unalterable mildness, His gentle indulgence, His supreme kindness, His tender compassion for the sufferings of humanity. Several of His wonderful sayings were repeated to her. They touched her to tears.

“If virtue exists upon this earth there must be a

God in heaven, for only He can be its recompense," she said.

"And I . . . I have believed in nothing," she went on, with disdain that dried the tears. "It is of no consequence. But I must see this Man. I must meet Him who seems, out of all the world, the only One who understands that Life needs consolation."

Those to whom she spoke were accustomed to her vagaries. That she should desire to see Jesus did not surprise them.

"But in what way can you become acquainted with the Nazarene?" they asked. "He lives in the desert, surrounded by poor, obscure people. How can you reach Him?"

The flush of impatience rose to Magdalen's cheek. Obstacles irritated her, opposition rendered her stubborn. After a moment of silence she held up the ivory lyre, an exquisite and costly instrument, across which her fingers had been idly wandering.

"This lyre, which you have praised so greatly, shall be the reward of him who procures for me the means of seeing this Man."

They endeavored to dissuade her. Servilius, a young Roman, the one of all her admirers who loved her with the greatest ardor, endeavored to win her away from this madness. In his secret heart he dreaded the result.

But nothing availed. She must see this wonderful Man, whose language seemed so different from

that of other men, whose morals were so pure; to whom every woman was either a mother or a sister. It was absolutely necessary. It was a new sensation, and as such possessed her heart. She was tormented by it night and day. It had to be realized. She must see Jesus of Nazareth. Those who listened to her did not understand, or put it down to passing fancy. Uneasiness had seized upon her soul—an uneasiness that could not be satisfied save in listening to the words of the Prophet from His own lips.

Ah, Mary of Magdala! What hidden means God employs to bring a soul to Himself! The longing which this spoiled beauty felt was the grace of heaven knocking at her heart. In the pursuit of evil she had heard the voice that called her from the pleasures of this world. God wanted her for Himself—and this God, whose very name caused her to tremble, was the Master to whom her soul was turning even then as the heliotrope turns to the sun. Soon would that soul be penetrated with new and wonderful and imperishable joys!

INTERLUDE

Angel of Heaven

Come, brethren, let us rejoice. The Lord will arise and manifest His power. Behold Him as a giant who cometh from his repose. His career hath begun.

Angel of Earth

Let us rejoice. Christ the Lord is about to display His might, to show forth His grandeur. The earth is in expectation. The sun, the water, the flowers, the heart of man, so often rebellious, listen in silence and will obey—for to Him and to Him only belong the sun, the water, the flowers, and man's heart. In His hand He turns them as He pleases. Whatsoever He would change is changed forthwith, for He is God the Almighty.

Angel of Heaven

O love! O bounty! O mercy! How can we sufficiently adore Thee! What are we, to offer praises worthy of Thee! The human race, redeemed by its God, may in the future offer Thee homage worthy of Thy greatness. For it will have cost the blood of a God! And the greatness of that ransom will give the praise of men inestimable value. Happy human race! The Redemption raises thee even to the throne of Jehovah,

and the angels hide themselves in their wings, and sing the destinies of man, restored to a higher place than was his before the Fall.

Angel of Earth

Silence! Peace! The earth salutes its Saviour. He advances into the solitudes, and the solitudes bound with joy. He is beautiful as the day-dawn; the stars tremble to see Him pass, clothed in mortal flesh which can not conceal His divinity.

Let us adore Him!

And the angels followed afar the steps of the Saviour.

CHAPTER XXIII

OUR LORD'S BAPTISM AND SOJOURN IN THE DESERT

SEVERAL years had elapsed since the death of Joseph, and, as we have said, Mary lived an even more retired life. She meditated and prayed continually: meditated on the miracles of joy with which her youth had been filled, and prayed for strength that she might be fortified to bear the unrivaled sorrows that awaited her.

Humble and resigned, she conversed with her Son when He descended from the mountain, to which He was so often accustomed to retire—there to think on the salvation of men, and the price that should be paid for it. Often, too, she spoke with the angels who visited now, as formerly, the abode where dwelt the Word made flesh. Mary was the mysterious link by which heaven and earth were united, the channel of divine grace. But despite this sublime mission, despite the high dignity with which she was clothed, Mary lived like the humblest of women.

O ye retired ones, who love your loneliness, think of our Mother Mary in her hidden life at Nazareth! Rejoice and be proud of your obscurity!

Jesus had now attained full manhood, being in His thirtieth year.

“And in those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the desert of Judea.”¹

Too well did Mary, the Mother of Jesus, comprehend what was in store. The words of the holy Precursor were carried to her ears: “But He that shall come after me, is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and in fire.”

Her Son was meant, her divine Son, who was her very God, though flesh of her flesh! On the eve of that day on which the preaching of John had been repeated to her, she prepared the meal of barley cakes and spread them before him. She was silent, brooding within her soul on the wonderful things which had already happened and were now about to occur.

“On the morrow I go from hence to Bethany,” said Jesus, in His mild and gentle tones. “To John, who preacheth near Jericho, on the lower Jordan. The son of Zachary doth fulfil his mission.”

Mary’s heart grew cold within her. Jesus was a man—was the time of separation at hand? Was He to leave her . . . now? Was this the dread hour? But even as these thoughts assailed her, He seemed to understand the depths of fear into which His words had plunged that loving heart, and gazed at her tenderly.

¹ St. Matthew iii, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

"I shall return," He said.

The Mother's heart bounded with joy, as intense as had been its fear. Not yet, not yet! Tears of happiness rose to her eyes. She must give Him up, some day, soon, but she could dwell in quietness a short while longer. She withdrew to her little cell to thank her God that the moment had not yet approached!

And on the morrow Jesus went from Galilee "to the Jordan, unto John to be baptized by him."³

Can we picture in our imagination this solemn meeting between the Precursor, who had lived so long in the desert, whose food had been locusts and wild honey, who, sanctified before his birth by the Saviour, had led the existence of an angel? And the reward of his years of privation was that the God he loved and worshiped came to be baptized at his hands.

"I ought to be baptized by Thee," he exclaimed. "Comest Thou to me?"

"Suffer it to be so now," answered the Saviour, mildly. "For so it becometh us to fulfil all justice."⁴

In spirit the Blessed Virgin followed her beloved Son, followed Him to the Jordan. In spirit she knelt with the angels when the waters began to flow upon the innocent head of the Redeemer, who was to take away the sins of the world. In her heart she

³ St. Matthew iii, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 15.

blessed the orphan son of Elizabeth and Zachary, for the love with which he saluted Jesus.

“This is He of whom I spoke!” he cried. “He that shall come after me is preferred before me, because He was before me, and of His fulness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”⁵

“But He will return,” whispered the loving Mother to her heart. “He has spoken the word. The hour is not yet. He will return to me.”

* * * * *

The desert, the wilderness of Judea, now stretched before the Saviour. Immediately after His baptism He was led by the Spirit, to be tempted by the devil. O most mysterious but most certain event in the history of mankind! The true Son of God tempted by the Evil One!

The wild aspect of this desolate region was familiar to John the Precursor, since he had lived there many years. Far from a corrupt world, in silence and by prayer, he had slowly made himself ready for his difficult mission. St. Mark tells us that in the wilderness the Son of God “was with beasts,” and tradition points to a high mountain a little west of Jericho as the “very high mountain” from which the Tempter showed Our Lord all the kingdoms of the world. This mountain, a limestone peak, ex-

⁵ St. John i, 15-17.

ceedingly sharp and abrupt, and overlooking the plain of the Jordan and beyond, has been called the Quarantania, in allusion to the fast of forty days.⁶

And we can well understand that the exalted Mother was allowed to perceive her beloved Child in the heart of the desert. For forty days the Saviour fasted, and Satan assailed the Son of man, not by interior temptations, but by outward suggestions.

“We have not a high priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities; but one tempted in all things such as we are [yet] without sin.”⁷

So did this second Adam suffer humiliation, that all the sons of Adam might share in His victory. The Evil One presented himself to the weary Saviour for the final test—the great assault.

“And the Tempter, coming, said to Him: If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.

“Who answered and said: Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.

“Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, and set Him upon the pinnacle of the Temple:

“If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down: for it is written: That He hath given His angels charge over Thee, and in their hands shall they bear Thee up . . .

⁶ Cf. Gigot, “Outlines of New Testament History,” Chapter VIII.

⁷ Hebrews iv, 15.

“Jesus said: It is written again: Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

“Again the devil took Him up into a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them.

“And said to Him: All these will I give Thee, if, falling down, Thou wilt adore me.

“Then Jesus saith to him: Begone, Satan: for it is written: The Lord, thy God, shalt thou adore, and Him only shalt thou serve.”⁸

* * * * *

Mary, His holy Mother, whose most pure gaze had never rested on any being but the spirits of heaven, now beheld the dread spirit of darkness as he approached her Son. She shuddered at the sight. . . .

But the Man-God, who had humbled Himself, triumphed, and Satan was driven back to hell, carrying all the shame of defeat with him. And when he had left our divine Saviour, the angels came to serve their God.

“But He will return,” wept the Mother, crossing her arms upon her aching heart. “He will return.”

And she threw herself upon her knees, and raised her sinless hands to heaven in love and adoration.

* * * * *

Our Lord returned to her, accompanied by His first disciples. The Mother met Him, and knelt on the ground before Him. And He laid His hands upon her head, blessing her.

⁸ St. Matthew iv, 3-10.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MARRIAGE AT CANA

ABOUT this time the Mother of the Saviour was invited to a marriage feast in Cana of Galilee. A maiden of her acquaintance was to be espoused to a young Nazarene, whose property lay next to the fields which were Mary's inheritance. At this period in that country, where manners were so simple, marriage ceremonies were performed with the greatest solemnity, and no one could refuse to be present when once invited—especially those who adhered to the Law, and deemed it a sacred duty to weep with those who wept and rejoice with those who rejoiced. Each relative, friend, and even neighbor (for neighborhood caused a sort of relationship) came to offer gifts or good wishes to the newly-wed and to sing to them the song of marriage.

Mary, then, went to Cana. Jesus accompanied her, for He fulfilled all the duties of life. The other Mary followed. And her sons, as well as those of Zebedee, formed the escort of the bridegroom. They were, according to custom, to conduct him to the home of his spouse, and accompany him on his return when he brought his wife back with him to

their new abode, after the prolonged festivities with which marriages were celebrated.

Mary, most beautiful still in spite of her years, bearing the impress of noble serenity, came, mounted on the foal of Eleabthona, who had died some years before. Kept back by a storm which overtook them in the plains of Esdraelon, the Mother and her Son arrived on the day and hour set for the ceremony. The parents, full of impatience, had wished to begin it. But the young spouses, delighted at the prospect of receiving Mary, whose very name meant happiness to those of Galilee, preferred to wait, rather than begin without her and Jesus, already venerated for His virtues and wisdom.

When they arrived they were conducted to the places of honor reserved for them—under a sycamore, beside the grandfather and father who were to bless the union.

The ceremony began. The betrothed bride, crowned with roses, and clothed in a tunic that was dyed with the saffron of Cilicia, veiled in an embroidered network of silver, came from the house, led by her mother. The bridegroom, who had remained apart from the others, was now conducted forward by one of his nearest kinsmen, he having no father.

He was arrayed in magnificent garb. On his head was a circle of gold. A mantle of Tyrian wool, ornamented with acorns of a purple hue, called zizith, added to the splendor of his manly comeliness. His

place was near that of the bride, whose blushes betrayed her emotion through the tissues of her veil. Then the friends of the bridal pair brought, to the sound of musical instruments, a canopy of brilliant stuff wrought with flowers, for the young couple belonged to the rank of rich farmers and the ornaments were rural.

Raising it over the heads of the spouses, the assistants sang: "Blest, blest be he who comes!" The grandfather, who had remained seated under the tree near the house, arose when he saw the bride and bridegroom approaching, and taking their hands, he united them, saying:

"May the God of Israel be with you, Rachel, and with you, Ananias, son of Achitob! May He bless you even to the third and fourth generation. And may you enjoy together that happiness which, even in former times, caused the patriarch Isaac to forget the tears which he shed at the tomb of his mother."

A cup of wine was brought. The bridegroom offered it to the bride. She touched it with her lips, and returned it to the bridegroom. He tasted it in his turn, and all the guests received it, each according to his rank, his age, or his degree of relationship. After which it was returned to the young husband, who dashed the crystal against the trunk of the sycamore.

At this moment the children present cried out joyously, and brought baskets filled with the golden

grain of the last harvest. The mother, approaching near to her daughter, lifted the corner of the tallith, the young husband's mantle, and placed it upon the head of the maiden, uttering words of advice and admonition. The matrons came in their turn. They threw grains of wheat into the air, and as these fell upon the heads of the spouses, they cried aloud:

"Increase and multiply, as this grain has multiplied before God!"

And the canticle of the espousals was begun, while the scribe, seated under the sycamore, wrote out the contract. The ceremony being finished, the bride's veil was removed by her mother, and all present could see the rich ornaments with which she was adorned, and which were the gifts of her husband. She wore magnificent earrings; chains of purest gold; bracelets of silver; golden circles enclosed her hair and rings glittered upon her fingers. At the sight of so many beautiful jewels the women present exclaimed in amazement and rapture. But the young man contemplated her modest beauty, more charming in his eyes than all the precious gifts that shone upon her.

When Mary, in her turn, approached Rachel, she, too, presented a gift—a tunic the color of the hyacinth, woven and dyed by the hands of the Virgin.

"My child, may you long wear this," she said, "in the joy and happiness of a peaceful union. Be amiable toward your husband. She whose name you bear was loving and amiable to him who toiled twice

seven years to gain her and who found, so much did he love her, that those years had passed like a day. Be wise as was Rebecca; faithful as was Sarah, the spouse of Abraham, and the benediction of Heaven be upon you."

Saying these tender words, the holy Virgin kissed the young bride upon the forehead, and in her bosom Rachel felt that her heart was melting under the sweetness of the Mother's caress. From that moment she who had been looked upon as a somewhat frivolous and giddy girl became as if made anew—an accomplished model of meekness, wisdom, and every virtue which is an ornament to a woman—virtues which Mary, the holy Virgin, possessed in so sublime a degree.

Jesus, meanwhile, congratulating the young husband, added His grave words of counsel and benediction:

"Love and protect the wife the Lord has given you. What God has joined together let no man put asunder, and His blessing will follow upon your paths. Your wife shall be in your house as a fruitful vine, and your children, like young olive plants, shall surround your table. Thus will the Lord protect those who fear Him."

These wise words from such grave lips sank deeply into the mind of the young man. Of violent passions and intemperate judgment, he had been feared by many. Now his future was to be marked by peace and wisdom.

These were the inestimable gifts of Jesus and Mary to the bride and bridegroom. By His august presence and divine benediction the Lord manifested the lofty estate of marriage which He Himself has raised to the sublime dignity of a sacrament of His Church.

During the days which followed, the feasts were prolonged under tents pitched in the valley of Cana, a fertile and luxuriant plain watered by abundant streams, and protected from the scorching heats of the south by the heights of Mount Thabor and a chain of shady hills, covered with tamarind-trees, nopals with thick branches, and terebinths of heavy spreading foliage. The maidens danced to the sound of psalteries, of the seven-reed flute, of tambourines ornamented with little bells of brass. The young men contended in races, others threw the quoit, a sport lately introduced by the Romans; others practised sling-throwing, showing wonderful proficiency. Prizes were offered to the players by the bridegroom—a rich girdle, a ploughshare but newly invented, and a cup of sithim wood, beautifully carved.

During these games Rachel remained beside the mother whom she was so soon to leave, and smiles followed tears as she looked upon her, while Ananias, presiding at the feasts, saw that all was in order, and that they were not interrupted. But he was intensely drawn toward the Son of Mary, with whom, until then, he had seldom come in contact, and lingered among the young men who were His rela-

tives and companions. The gravity of their speech, the beauty of their ideas, so completely different to those of the youth of the age, mystified and delighted him. He wondered again and again who Jesus was—his neighbor, true; the Son of Mary, yes; whose father had been Joseph—all this he knew. But at the sound of that mild, but authoritative voice, his heart was stirred within him. He demanded more knowledge of Him, and often he forgot the smiles of his young spouse to remain near Him. Whether He spoke or whether He remained silent, His presence alone infused happiness into the soul of the youth—a happiness he could not describe, but which, nevertheless, he preferred to every other.

The first few days glided away in this manner.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CHANGING OF THE WATER INTO WINE

THE noon-hour feast had been prepared under the tents. The young girls, their large dark eyes sparkling, and their luxuriant dark tresses now concealing, now revealing the rosy hue of their blushing cheeks, prepared the tables, strewing them first with fresh flowers gathered from the banks of the near-by rivulet. They occupied themselves, also, in making garlands for the guests, and, in sport' were trying them on their own lovely heads, when suddenly a numerous troop of travelers, mounted on camels, appeared at the extremity of the plain, on the side nearest the lake. Soon one whom the camels had until then concealed from view, advanced rapidly on a mettlesome steed.

The sports ceased at once. All eyes were fixed upon the rider. Horses were little used in Judea at that time—they were a luxury known only to the very wealthy. While the horseman was approaching, several of those who surrounded Jesus watched the graceful movements of the noble animal, and another, an elderly man, repeated, slowly, the words of Job:

“Wilt Thou give strength to the horse, or clothe his neck with neighing? Wilt Thou lift him up like the locusts? The glory of his nostrils is terror.

“He breaketh up the earth with his hoof, he pranceth boldly: he goeth forth to meet armed men. He despiseth fear, he turneth not his back to the sword.

“Above him shall the quiver rattle, the spear and the shield shall glitter. Chafing and raging he swalloweth the ground, neither doth he make account when the noise of the trumpet soundeth.

“When he heareth the trumpet, he saith, Ha, ha! he smelleth the battle afar off, the encouraging of the captains, and the shouting of the army.”¹

The horseman continued to advance. Having come to a slight obstacle he caused his animal to clear it, and then patting its neck arrived at the first tent, and stopped. The bridegroom, Ananias, detaching himself from the group of the young men, went to meet him, saluted him according to custom, and conducted him to the elders, who were seated under the trees near by. Here, in the name of hospitality, the stranger demanded rest and refreshment for his companions, male and female, whom he indicated by a nod.

He who spoke was clothed after the Roman fashion, but his handsome patrician features presented a mixture of arrogance and disdain that displeased

¹ Job xxxix, 19-25.

the old and prudent parents of the modest Rachel. Moreover, he looked too boldly at the young girls gathered under the sycamore-tree close at hand. The grandparents and elders remained silent while he cast these appraising glances about him and caressed his steed in silence. Gladly would they have refused his request, but this the laws of hospitality forbade, and they replied, in grave and serious tones:

“Thy companions, male and female, and thyself, are welcome under the tents of our people.”

Servilius, for it was he, saluted the group of elders haughtily, and then, throwing himself upon his beautiful horse, he pressed its flanks, and with the speed of a dart covered the distance that intervened between him and his cavalcade, followed by the wondering, and in some cases uneasy, looks of many.

Magdalen awaited him with restless impatience.

“Your ivory lyre is mine!” exclaimed Servilius, triumphantly, as he approached her. “I wish that you could give me the art that you possess of playing it.”

But Magdalen frowned.

“You are about to see Jesus,” he added hastily, noting her displeasure, which he dreaded.

“You are certain He is among these people?” she asked, with eagerness.

“I am certain of it. For the last few days He has been present at a marriage festival here in Cana.

I have found this out and conducted you here because of it. They now await you in the tents. Come."

But Magdalen grew so pale, and shuddered so violently, that a secret uneasiness suddenly took possession of Servilius. He loved her ardently, and it was because of this love that his soul felt the change that was about to occur in her.

The women alighted from their litters, the men from their animals, and, forming a brilliant and striking group, they advanced toward the tents. Magdalen led the way, leaning on Servilius' arm, and followed by those of her train, men of elegant attire, women gayly costumed. Magdalen's striking beauty was heightened by the garb she wore. The daughters of Judea, especially when traveling, covered themselves with a thick veil. But Magdalen alighted from her litter with head, arms, and shoulders bare, and ornamented with priceless jewels. She wore a tunic fringed with gold; a flowing robe of silver tissue, richly embroidered, hung loosely from her, and fell in graceful folds about her body.

In astonishment and awe the young girls paid this wonderful apparition the respect due to a queen. But the elders shook their heads, and the matrons blushed as she passed. Beautiful she was, indeed, but her whole air denoted the character of her life. Loud her speech, louder her laugh; her garments and her hair shed forth an intoxicating perfume such as the women of Israel never used.

Yet her voice trembled when, approaching the elders, she said, according to custom:

“Peace be with you.”

“And with you wisdom,” replied the grandfather, in a grave tone.

She was conducted to the tent where the table of honor was laid out, her seat not far removed from the young couple. Servilius was placed next to her, and near by all their companions.

Two young girls, the sisters of the bride, approached the strangers before the repast, and offered them water in earthen vessels, to wash their hands. The maidens performed this duty to each in turn, with a modesty that rendered them lovely and interesting. Magdalen took from her finger a ring set with costly sapphires, and presented it to them. But, blushing, they refused to accept it, and one of the old men spoke.

“Our maidens adorn themselves only to please their husbands. Nor do they accept gifts save from the hands of a friend.”

The ablution of the strangers was completed in silence. Magdalen smiled cheerfully; she laughed frequently. But her heart was beating with violence in her breast. The cold welcome of the elders froze her. There was an atmosphere of modesty and sweet innocence all about her, in which she felt out of place.

— “What has brought me here?” she asked herself, in vexation. “Is it to allow these men to gaze

upon my beauty, who love only the women whose charms are concealed by veils? To display my riches to people whose pleasures are simple, whose tables have no ornaments other than the flowers gathered from the meadows, and who partake of their food from earthen vessels?"

She was extremely restless and timid, but overcame, as best she could, these unusual sensations.

"No matter. I have come and I will stay," she told herself, boldly.

Her eyes sought Jesus in the crowd, for she wished to single Him out in the midst of the young men who surrounded Him. He was conversing with John, whose fairness of face deceived her for a few moments, and she watched him, waiting for his words. John was too engrossed in his divine Master to observe her. He was absorbed in Jesus.

The gayety of the feast—the preceding days of which had passed so happily—was chilled by the presence of the strangers. Constraint obtruded where, until now, the utmost cordiality had reigned.

And the young couple, at the head of the table, seemed uneasy. The holy Virgin, seated near them, first perceived their embarrassment. The servant to whose care the provisions and wine had been committed came several times to his master, and now Mary overheard his words:

"I did not calculate upon this increase of guests. Master, the wine fails."

To receive strangers at one's table without being

able to offer them the cup of welcome was, in those days of hospitality, a great disgrace. Trouble and shame were depicted on the countenance of Ananias. Mary well understood the nature of his plight. Addressing herself to her Son, she said, in a low voice:

“They have no wine.”²

At the voice of Mary, Jesus turned. His face shone with divine splendor, for He had just finished a long and earnest talk with John upon the things of heaven. His whole head seemed aureoled in light, as did Mount Sinai when Jehovah reposed upon it. Magdalen, beholding Him thus, drew back with a little cry and covered her face with her hands. But He addressed Himself to Mary.

“Woman, what is this to Me and to thee? My hour is not yet come.”³

His voice vibrated through every heart, His countenance dazzled the eyes of all. Mary lowered her head. She could not look unmoved upon the splendor of her Son, but crossing her arms upon her breast, she remained silent a moment. She understood the spiritual meaning of those divine words and knew the tender sympathy of His heart. Then, turning to the waiters, she said:

“Whatsoever He shall say to you, do ye.”⁴

There were in the tent six large stone urns, which were used for ordinary purification, and each of these held two or three measures.

² St. John ii, 3.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

“Fill the water-pots with water,” said Jesus to the waiters, and they did as He bade them, upon which He added:

“Draw out now and carry to the chief steward of the feast.”

And they carried it.

Magdalen kept her face hidden in the folds of her robe. Servilius, terrified, would have taken her away, but she had to see the end of this wonderful Man’s words. It came when the steward tasted this water made wine, and not knowing its source, approached the bridegroom.

“Every man at first setteth forth good wine,” he said. “But thou hast kept the good wine until now.”

Terrified at this strange happening, the companions of Magdalen, both men and women, rose to depart from the tents at once; to fly and drag her with them. But she resisted. Servilius, too, implored her to leave this spot which was rendering her so unhappy.

But she shook them off. Tearing herself from their hands, she ran forward and cast herself at the feet of the Saviour, saying no word, but weeping bitter tears. He did not speak to the poor sinner at His feet, only looked down at her, gravely and mildly. All were stirred at this scene. Servilius himself was deeply moved. Perhaps, if pride had not prevented him, he, too, would have thrown himself on the ground as Magdalen did, at the feet

of God. Good inspirations are not so rare as our obedience to them. We blush sooner at the good which is new to us than at the evil which we have known so long.

* * * * *

The holy Virgin had withdrawn. The dreaded hour was at last at hand, and now there was no doubt. She knew that with the working of His first public miracle the mission of her Son would commence.

Her soul marveled at the condescension of God; but her heart was sick with fear and sorrow for her beloved Son.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

AND now ye angels who love Mary, weep, and come nearer to her, to sustain and fortify her.

Her joys have been, and are, infinite. But behold the immense, the inexpressible sorrows which are about to fall upon her one by one, and altogether. Behold the Woman full of tenderness as a mother, full of adoration as a humble creature—about to resign herself, not to her own sufferings—such a task would be far too easy—but to the sufferings of her blessed Son, whom she ardently loves; to the sufferings of that God whom she adores more than any intelligent being because beyond all she understands the immensity, beauty, bounty, and power of God.

Angels of heaven, descend to the heart of this Mother, and bear her up in her great anguish.

Returning from Cana to her home at Nazareth, through the roads that led across the mountains, Mary's uneasiness was most evident. She could not take her eyes from her beloved Son, fearing at every moment to see Him disappear. She had checked the pace of the little animal on which she was riding,

and separated herself from her companions in order to remain beside Him. She listened to every word that fell from His lips, and treasured it in her heart with a tenderness and mournfulness that knew no bounds.

Well did she realize that these few hours she was passing in His company were among the last she would enjoy upon this earth. Her heart ached at the thought. He accompanied her to Nazareth, and their conversation was filled with ineffable joy and sublimity. Happy in the presence of her dearly-beloved, nevertheless, now that He was about to separate Himself from her to enter the most perilous dangers, she felt her soul grow weak within her. She knew how these dangers were to end. Tears flowed from her eyes, even though in spite of this realization, she comprehended the mysteries of the Redemption.

“Am I not to unite the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the incredulous to the wisdom of the just, to prepare unto the Lord a perfect people?” Such were the words of Jesus: “For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.” And raising His eyes to heaven, He added, “Father, the hour is come. Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may glorify Thee!”

“Thou art about to leave me,” said His Mother, in mournful tones. “Thou wilt suffer, and I shall not be near to help or sorrow with Thee. Why is it no longer the time in which I carried Thee in my

arms, in which my tenderness would have defended Thee, in which I could have placed myself between Thee and danger? Then, at least, I could share Thy pain—a consolation which mothers only, perhaps, can understand.”

She fixed her eyes upon her Son, and as He bent His gaze toward her, she realized the divine tenderness of His heart, for His own eyes were filled with tears.

He regarded her with ineffable love. She knew she could obtain anything, everything, from Him. She cast herself at His feet, trembling. Nature was smitten with fear in her, but she conquered Nature with superior strength. And Jesus, gazing at this sublime woman, so humble and so tender, so strong and so docile, read her very thoughts. But He permitted her to utter them. On her knees before her Son—it was to her God that she addressed herself—she offered this prayer:

“Wherever Thou mayest be, near me, or at a distance from me, may I suffer with Thee? May I feel all Thy sorrows with Thee—as much as my feeble and infirm nature will permit?”

Jesus gazed upon her with that look of Son and Father which penetrated the depths of her soul. He blessed her, and granted her request. When He lifted her from the ground, she felt an all-consuming joy. It was in this wise that they bade each other farewell, and Mary retired to her chamber to calm her heart in prayer.

But she followed her Son: through Capharnaum and into the Holy City itself, for the first Pasch—over Judea, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Juttah. She witnessed the miracles by which Jesus manifested His power, and her soul still experienced some moments of joy, for she saw the people follow Our Lord in crowds and bless Him, saying:

“A great prophet has arisen up among us and Christ has visited His people!”

And the Virgin wept for happiness. She was able to show a calmer face, during these times, to the women, who, since the departure of Jesus, were accustomed to come and pray with her.

* * * * *

Among this number was Magdalen. After the marriage feast at Cana, and the miracle which had been performed there, this sinful woman was entirely altered. Vainly did Servilius, softened but not changed by the sight of Jesus, strive to remove the strong impression which the Lord had made upon her. Vainly did the pleasure-lovers about her endeavor to entice her into new enjoyments.

“What are these pleasures?” she asked. “Oh, I have been disgusted with them so long! I pity the world that can offer no other joys than those of dissipation and dishonor. Do you not feel the nothingness, the shamefulness of everything? If you can not, your misery is even greater than I think it. But you must, you do feel even as I! Habit en-

tices you; luxury has enchained you. Ah, let us believe! Let us follow Jesus of Nazareth. He has the words of life. My dead soul has become alive within me. My heart throbs in my bosom now that I have heard His voice."

So Magdalen bade them adieu. She doffed her splendid garments, and covered her long and beautiful hair—not with the modest veil of the virgins of Israel, but with the veil of mourning. Shortly after the departure of Jesus she came to Mary's dwelling.

The sinner stopped, trembling, on the threshold of that house. But Mary extended her arms toward her:

"Approach, my child; I have been awaiting you."

At these words of mercy and pity, Magdalen cast herself upon the ground, and hid her face in the garments of the Blessed Virgin. For a long time she could not gain control of her emotion, but wept as if her heart would break. Finally, through her sobs, she was able to make known the thoughts which were surging within her.

"Oh, you who are sinless, speak to my misguided and repentant soul! Until this hour, my life has been most miserable. All things for me have been empty and full of bitterness. My burning heart consumed itself without being able to reach the happiness it craved. Had I loved deeply, truly, I might not have been cast into the abyss of shame and regret. But all who approached me were as frivolous

and unhappy as myself, seeking that which they could not find. I felt that my love must be admiration, adoration. I would love God. It is God whom I love to-day. He alone merits our love! He alone can fill the heart of His creature! I belong to Him! I belong to you! Dispose of me until death. I will follow you wheresoever you go, happy if I can kiss your feet."

And Magdalen embraced the knees of the Queen of Virgins. Mary smiled at her in kindness, for she saw in her that profound and sincere repentance which rejoices heaven itself. In her sweet, pure voice she reassured the unfortunate, whose eyes were changed into two fountains of tears, so great was her grief for the days she had spent in ignoring the laws of God.

* * * * *

But suddenly Mary is silent. She hears the multitudes crying out around Jesus. Is it triumph? Is it scorn?

"Ah, I see Him!" she exclaimed. "Yes, it is He, my beloved Son. His face is bright as though the sun were upon it; He is satisfied; He smiles; He raises His eyes to heaven. Ah! He is offering to His heavenly Father all this great crowd which follows Him, and in which He sees upright hearts and men of good will.

"Behold Him advancing along the shores of Lake Tiberias. Behold the accomplishment of the prophecy of Isaias: 'Land of Zabulon, and Land of

Nephthali . . . the way of the sea beyond the Jordan of the Galilee of the Gentiles. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen.¹

“Happy people! At least these have come to salute their Saviour. How they crowd about Him! He would speak, but can not. Men and women are pressing upon Him. In vain the sons of Zebedee, and those of my sister Mary strive to clear a space. All are too eager to hear Him. Simon has taken up a boat that has been hidden in the weeds. Jesus goes out in it, a little distance from the shore. Ah! . . . Now He speaks, and His voice is heard by all. The earth is attentive, the wind is hushed, the echoes are silent, the heavens listen. . . .”

And the voice of the Virgin ceased, and she knelt as if wrapt in some wondrous vision.

Magdalen the sinner saw nothing but the narrow walls of Mary’s dwelling; heard nothing but the sighing of the winds in the mountains. She bowed her head in humility.

And the hours passed.

* * * * *

“He standeth in a plain place. His disciples are with Him and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem. . . .

¹ *Isaias ix, 1, 2.*



“Can you not hear the words that come from His mouth? Would that I could repeat them so that all the world would listen! But is not a single soul as precious to this divine Heart as the whole world?”

“Blessed are ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are ye that hunger now: for you shall be filled.

“Blessed are ye that weep now: for you shall laugh.”²

“Woe to you that are filled: for you shall hunger.

“Woe to you that now laugh: for you shall mourn and weep.”

Magdalen heard eagerly, understanding that these beautiful precepts, falling so sweetly from the lips of the Virgin, alluded to a spiritual life.

“Ah!” she thought within her own soul. “I have been rich and in joy, and now my eyes weep bitter tears. But I have left all. My soul has hungered and thirsted, and behold God Himself comes to quench my thirst and appease my hunger! Blessed be so good a God!”

After a short silence the Virgin continued:

“Love your enemies . . . do good to those that hate you.”⁴

Magdalen had never heard such doctrine.

² St. Luke vi, 20, 21.

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ Ibid., 27.

“Bless them that curse you, and pray for them that calumniate you.

“And to him that striketh thee on the one cheek, offer also the other.

“And him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also.

“Give to every one that asketh thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again.

“And as you would that men should do to you, do you also to them in like manner.

“If you love them that love you what thanks are to you? For sinners also love those that love them.

“And if you do good to them who do good to you, what thanks are to you? For sinners also do this.”⁵

“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.”⁶

At this repetition of Christ’s divine word, Magdalen knelt and kissed the robe of the Virgin.

“It is the God of mercy who has reclaimed me, the vilest of His creatures. He alone understands, He alone can hold out salvation.”

During the days that followed, the Blessed Virgin could indeed attend in spirit on her divine Son. He cured a great many sick; He appeased the angry waves. He commanded the winds and the tempest. The multitude, ever-increasing in numbers, followed Him. His disciples wondered, asking themselves the question:

⁵ St. Luke vi, 28-33.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

“What manner of Man is this? for the winds and the seas obey Him?”⁷

He spoke and the sick were healed. He cast a look upon the sinner and his soul was transformed.

Yet some there were to attribute these miracles to demons. These were the ones who expected and desired the Messias to come as a conqueror, an earthly king, surrounded by the pomp of an earthly monarch.

“This Man is poor,” they said. “He is followed only by the poor. What power can He ever obtain? What can we hope to gain from Him or through Him? Away with Him! He is a false prophet!”

These murmurs, however, could not prevent the poor from following Him, and the astonished crowds from flocking about Him.

The humble Virgin comprehended all.

No hope entered her soul. She knew too well that nothing could save this voluntary Victim. But her joy was in those redeemed souls who gathered close to Him, believing in Him. Those for whom her Son had come upon earth to suffer would indeed profit by the Redemption. They would be saved!

“Oh!” she exclaimed, often, raising her pure hands to heaven. “May this precious blood, at least, be not shed in vain.”

And Mary, with those holy women about her who believed in the divinity of her Son, and who came

⁷ St. Matthew viii, 27.

to unite with her in her prayer, remained in long ecstasies. She beheld her Son, she understood His mission, she saw Him sowing broadcast over the world the seeds of a doctrine so sublime as to confound the human mind.

Or, when He came to that part of the country in which she dwelt, she, in company with the holy women, followed Him, hidden in the crowd.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WIDOW'S SON

IT was at Nazareth that the Messiah had fewest followers. "A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house,"¹ Jesus had said, in leaving the town which had sheltered Him so long. And in the course of His whole mission He rarely returned to it, for He knew that there His preaching would be without fruit.

Neither the humble Mary nor the lowly Joseph had ever told of the wonders of the birth of Jesus. He had passed as the son of an obscure workman, and the neighbors—those who had seen Him lead, in their very midst, a solitary and busy life, similar in almost every detail to their own—could not believe in Him, despite the prodigies they heard recounted. Some declared that He neglected the Law—and to prove this assertion, added that He healed on the Sabbath day, even as He did on the other days of the week. Others again, hearing that He conversed with publicans and Samaritans, preaching brotherly love to all men, without regard to place or country, were scandalized.

¹ St. Matthew xiii, 57.

His brothers—so called because they were the children of Joseph's sister—those who loved and followed Him, doubted the truth of His divine mission. They saw in Him an extraordinary man. They admired Him. But they did not believe in His divinity. Several times they had merited His rebuke, "men of little faith, slow of heart to believe." His miracles astonished them, but could not completely banish their doubts. Jesus restored sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb. He changed the most rebellious hearts and minds, yet their incredulity, vanquished for the moment, returned.

But they could not weary the goodness of Jesus. He read their hearts; He saw that, within, they were pure and upright. They loved Him dearly, but their minds were in doubt.

And the miracles continued.

In their presence He cured all kinds of disease and suffering. He multiplied the loaves in the desert, and fed the hungry multitudes that flocked to hear His words. He healed the mother-in-law of Simon, who had been sick for twelve years, and was gradually wasting away. The officer from Capharnaum approached Him, supplicating Him that He would come and restore his dying son to life. And the words of Jesus were: "Go thy way, thy son liveth."²

And the father, returning home, learned that at the

² St. John iv, 50.

very hour in which the Lord had pronounced these words the fever left his son.

Nor could they forget that early incident in His ministry when, before Sichar, near the well of Jacob, they saw the confusion of the woman of Samaria, to whom the Lord had spoken.

“Come and see a Man who has told me all things whatsoever I have done. Is not He the Christ?”³

The Samaritans themselves believed when told of what had occurred. “And many more believed in Him because of His own word.”⁴

One day, James and Jude, returning from a mission to which the Saviour had dispatched them, had come, according to His orders, to rejoin Him in a city of Galilee called Naim, where their Master had arrived that morning.

There they found the people in great agitation. The women had left their household duties, the men their labors. A great rumor reigned in the streets and public places, and from the crowds that flocked together in tremendous excitement rose the praises of the Lord, men crying out:

“A great prophet has appeared among us; the Lord God of Israel has visited His people!”

Some, seized with fear, struck their breasts, tore their hair, and spread ashes upon their heads in penance for their sins, and all conversed, some in dread and some in astonishment, of the marvelous

³ St. John iv, 29.

⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

occurrence which had transpired under their very eyes.

The two disciples were anxious to find out the reason of such general consternation. They learned it from the mouth of an eye-witness who had evidently not yet recovered from his fright.

“The Lord arrived this morning from Capharnaum,” he said. “Passing near the gate of Nelpha, He met a dead body which was being carried out to be buried. Now, the entire town had seen the dead man during the funeral ceremonies, for all had sorrow for his mother. He was her only son, and she was a poor widow.”

The narrator paused as if to control his emotion.

“When the Lord saw her He had compassion on her, and said ‘Weep not.’ Then He came near and touched the bier. They that were carrying it stood still.”

Again the man ceased, almost overcome.

“And Jesus said, ‘Young man, I say to thee, Arise.’ And he that was dead sat up and began to speak. And He gave him to his mother.⁵

“I saw him,” continued the man faintly. “His limbs were still trembling with terror at the thought of what he had been delivered from.”

James and Jude exchanged looks of surprise.

“Do the dead obey His voice?” they murmured. But before they were able to express the thoughts

⁵ St. Luke vii, 12-15.

which this extraordinary event caused to spring up in their souls, they beheld a numerous crowd approaching them.

It was the man restored to life, whom the people were conducting in triumph to his dwelling. Beside him walked his mother, who appeared to have lost her reason for joy. Holding one of her son's hands in hers, as if to assure him of her presence, her manner plainly indicated that happiness had almost unbalanced her.

"Let us see this through to the end," said the disciples. And they joined the crowd and followed.

Despite the rejoicing caused by this tremendous event the silence was remarkable. They had witnessed the occurrence of the miracle, but with the admiration it kindled was mingled a great fear. So that, when the young man and his mother had arrived at their own house, those who had escorted them thither wished them a thousand prosperities and withdrew, speaking in low tones of the wonderful thing which they had seen with their own eyes.

James and Jude, compelled thereto by an ungovernable curiosity, approached the open door after the crowd had dispersed, resolving to hear more from the lips of the young man himself. They hesitated, however, for although they could be seen, neither the youth nor the woman paid the slightest attention to them. Still clothed in his winding-sheet, the young man was seated on a stool by the

almost extinguished fire. The disordered bed, the untidiness of the room, the embalmer's table, the vessels of perfume, the remains of aromatic herbs scattered upon the floor—all, all announced the indescribable desolation which death brings to the home. The young man looked about him furtively, fearfully, and every once in a while a terrible shudder convulsed his frame.

His mother, whose emotions had, till now, deprived her of the power of speaking, began to weep.

“My son! My well-beloved Melkam! Is it true that I again see thee? That thou art restored to me? My child, my life, my treasure! Speak to me! Of what art thou afraid? Dost thou still suffer? Speak to me!”

Melkam did not answer his mother nor did he return her caresses or dry her tears. Instead, he continued to gaze about him in terror. She was grieved, and followed the direction of his eyes. Then she observed, for the first time, the poverty of her dwelling, and thinking that it was displeasure which she saw upon that livid and wasted countenance, she went on:

“Oh, my dear son, our home is indeed most empty. I sold all that I possessed of any value to cover the expenses of thy funeral. We have only that which thou now lookest upon! But what of it, what of it?” She threw her arms about him and drew him close to her bosom. “*Thou art here!* What matters fam-

ine or thirst, or poverty, or evil of any kind? Thou art *here!* My beloved, my beloved! I will work, I will beg, I will starve for thee, so great is my love, my gratitude, my courage! Blest a thousand, thousand times be He who has restored thee to me! Now I may again cherish the sweet hope that has ever encouraged me during the days of my widowhood. I shall not have the sorrow of seeing thee die! Thou, thou wilt close my eyes!"

She looked at her son tenderly—then bent and kissed his forehead, as if to assure herself that life and warmth had really revived his body. And when her lips encountered that living flesh she raised her streaming eyes to heaven in a very transport of intensest joy.

But the young man did not move. Gloom shrouded his features—a gloom that began, gradually, to give way to profound fear.

"Mother!" he exclaimed at last, in a low tone.

"My son?" she answered.

"Is—is it true that I behold thee? Is it . . . true? Art thou sure? Sure? Ah! What a ream I have had! What terror has taken possession of me, of my heart, my brain. . . . Ah, mother, do not leave me! Do not! Hold me, let me feel thy loving hands! Do not let me die again!"

He clung to her as if he were a little child, and she put her arm about him gently, striving to reassure him. After a moment's silence, resting his cheek upon the hand he held, he began to speak.

"How dreadful is death when one is guilty! O my God, I will never forget Thee! I will wash all sin from my heart! Oh, mother, if you knew! Damned! My soul was damned!"

"Dear boy, it is past—"

"I was descending, whirled by the wind into a gulf without noise or weight. A demon kept forcing me down, pressing me, so that I could not give one single look backward. It was that demon against whom thou hadst warned me—"

He began to tremble violently.

"Fear not," said the poor mother, resting her boy's head against her bosom. "It is over. Fear not."

James and Jude exchanged glances of awe.

"He was the angel of darkness," said the young man. "And so announced himself. 'I have fed thy passions upon earth, and tempted thy young desires. Thou hast followed my counsels, and now . . . thou art mine, mine!' And he laughed—and his laughter was like a sword, at once red with heat and frozen with bitterest cold, which pierced through my whole body."

"Oh, my child, my child!" said the mother, weeping as she kissed him.

"And then another voice sounded near me. A voice which fell feebly on my ears, and which, as the distance between us increased, grew still more faint. 'Oh,' it exclaimed, 'if thou hadst but listened to me in the voice of thy mother! Thou wouldst now be

accompanying me to the realms of the angels of light!"

"With difficulty I lifted my head. There, far above me, I beheld a troop of beautiful seraphim. They escorted a soul, white as a dove, and this beautiful soul looked at me with pity. But the angel of darkness laughed once more, and pushed me on . . . down . . . down . . . to that yawning abyss. I beheld that place where faults are expiated. . . .

"And then a voice resounded through the gloom. Such a voice! At its accents the demon released me. My downward progress was stayed. I opened my eyes . . . before Him who had called me, and looking upon Him with dumb lips, my heart cried out, 'Master, behold Thy servant!'

"Ah, mother, watch over me, lest I again return to the tomb. Who is this that has restored me? Where is He? How shall I find Him and serve Him evermore? How does it happen that I am here . . . with thine arms about me . . ."

He regarded her with uneasiness, for he feared this life to which he had returned. And the mother, twice happy, related to him the miracle of his resurrection, and how Jesus had restored to her alive the son who had been two days dead.

Very softly James and Jude stole away, not daring to interrupt, by a single word, this tender and affecting scene, their hearts filled with the deepest conviction of **Christ's** divinity.

“Death and hell obey Him,” they said. “Can we doubt? No, no! He is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God!”

* * * * *

As for Melkam, he embraced his mother affectionately.

“From this hour I wish to become a new man. Life has not been restored to me that I may lose my soul a second time. My dear mother, bless me. Never again shalt thou have to complain that I pay no heed to thy wise counsels!”

He caressed her, and the poor mother, in a very transport of joy, fell upon her knees, thanking God who had restored her son to her in full physical strength, at the same time enlightening his soul.

Afterwards, when they had time for recollection, and the youth had somewhat recovered his strength, he turned to his mother thoughtfully.

“Mother, it would be well for us to follow this Man, and be instructed by Him. Since death obeys Him, He must have the words of eternal life.”

So, rising, they set out, and found and followed Jesus, and Melkam’s voice was raised above all the others who sang the Lord’s praises, crying:

“Blessed be He whom heaven and earth and hell obey!”

So Christ passed in the midst of acclamations. The sick, the poor, and the infirm followed Him, or crawled after Him, or begged to be carried wher-

ever His way led. A divine virtue emanated from Him. Those whom He approached were cured or strengthened.

* * * * *

Now, while Melkam thus followed our dear Lord through the city, making one of the great throng which surrounded Him, he was astonished after some time, to perceive, passing close to him, a white figure entirely covered by a veil. An old man, recognizable, by his garments, to be a chief of a synagogue, marched near her, and sang aloud the praises of Jesus Christ.

“Behold!” he cried, in thrilling tones, “my dearly-beloved daughter! She was dead. We were about to carry her sweet body to the grave! With her had passed the happiness of my house! And then He came, and restored her to life! May His name be ever blessed! May His name be adored from generation to generation, until the end of the ages.”

And his voice was raised in a song of joy that told of the resurrection of his only one.

The young girl, whose name was Jezel, still bore upon her pale face the marks of the sickness which had brought her to her grave. She seemed, moreover, to have only one emotion—love for the Master, who was passing amid the throng, and whom she endeavored to keep in view. Melkam heard the old man’s words, and trembled. He approached near to the maiden.

“Thou, too?” he said. “Has the Master brought thee back to earth? I, also, owe my life to Him!”

The daughter of Jairus—for such was her father’s name—uttered a low cry.

“Hast thou been snatched from death?”

“And given time for repentance. I was on the brink of hell.”

The maiden shuddered.

“Poor soul! Ah! Bless God all the days of thy life—”

“My mother, walking beside my bier, met the Man of God, and on her He had compassion. He recalled me from the gates of the damned—whence weeping and the gnashing of teeth already ascended to me!”

These two young and handsome children called back to life—one from the threshold of heaven, the other from the brink of hell—conversed a long time upon the miracles of sorrow and happiness of which both had had a glimpse. Those who surrounded them listened with terror, and some who had never given a thought to life beyond the grave, were smitten with fear.

“Man lives when life is o’er!” they said, in astonishment. And several left all and went after Jesus.

The mother of Melkam and the father of Jezel followed their children, mingling in the crowd. They wept for joy as they heard their voices; as they looked upon them, living, walking, moving, whom they had beheld lifeless and motionless.

They were transported with happiness. At nightfall each went to his home—but Melkam could not forget the sweet young girl, and she, on her part, demanded the presence of her new friend. The terrors and joys of death filled their minds. They were like two travelers, who, having visited a distant country, where each had encountered great suffering and great dangers, knew now no greater pleasure than that of talking over what they had seen.

Both followed Jesus from city to city. They could not leave Him. He drew them on and on, their hearts on fire with love of Him.

“This Christ, this God made man,” said Jezel one day, “who by a word recalled us to this earth—do you know that I beheld His countenance in the celestial regions?”

“And I, Jezel,” returned Melkam, tremblingly, “dare not contemplate Him even now! I shall never forget the sternness as I was forced downward . . . downward toward the bottomless abyss!”

“He is everywhere,” said the young and innocent girl. “But if He were always present to thy heart, Melkam, and if thy life were employed in His service, thou wouldst not fear Him. As for me, I can not do aught but look upon Him. His presence fills my soul with that unutterable content and perfect happiness which I enjoyed for a moment in the company of the angels.”

“Jezel,” said Melkam, tenderly, “permit me to live near thee. Teach me how to love Him. Thou

wilt be my shield against every evil thought or action. If I had always known thee I would have been worthy of thee.”

And so did this young maid, by her love of purity and goodness lead Melkam to the love of God and the love of virtue.

After these great, these incomprehensible miracles, the number of Jesus' disciples suddenly increased, and the Apostles, the men whom He had chosen from among all to carry His word throughout the world, believed in Him with invincible faith, and followed Him with admiration and confidence.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ST. JOHN IS BEHEADED BY COMMAND OF HEROD

THE Blessed Virgin had, for a long time, been separated from Jesus, having no communication save that secret vision of the spirit which had been His parting gift to this dearly-loved, this noble Mother. Thus had she followed Him in His sublime career. Thus had she observed the miracles wrought in every place, and the manifestation of the power of the Saviour. She rejoiced in the glorification of her Son, rejoiced the more, perhaps, because she saw in these prodigies, succeeding one another without interruption, a consoling proof that sin had become less intense upon this earth, and that the circle in which the Christ shone was enlarging daily.

“And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”¹

In truth, it is not the miracles performed by the Son of God which confound the intelligence. That the dead should be raised to life by His voice; that the waves should be stilled; that the elements should obey Him; that He who made them should

¹ St. John i, 5.

command them—all these are facts that may cast terror into the heart of man, but will not surprise him.

Rather, that which astonishes us is that the Divinity has been able to inhabit the earth without changing or replacing its order by a divine order. But evil resisted—passively, 'tis true, yet effectively. And the Lord did not destroy its power. So inviolable is human liberty.

The holy Virgin saw lepers cured and restored to the society which had excluded them. She saw tongues loosened. She saw Jesus enter the synagogue of Capharnaum, and exorcise there the devil which possessed the youth. She saw miracle after miracle performed, and yet men doubted Him, and spoke evil of Him.

And then came the report of the death of St. John the Baptist. Mary heard it, and trembled, for she knew that in death, as in life, John was to precede her Son. Everything was being accomplished!

Herod had cast John into prison for having reproached him with his dissolute intimacies with Herodias, the wife of his brother, and from the consequences of these reproaches nothing had been able to save him; neither the sanctity of his pure life, nor his exalted virtues, nor his serious teachings, nor his admirable doctrines—no, not even the involuntary respect which Herod entertained for him. Bitterly offended by the Baptist, Herodias sought every means to compass his death.

An occasion soon favored her. At a feast her

daughter Salome danced with such grace before Herod, that, intoxicated with the abandon of the moment, he cried out: "Ask what you will! If it be even to the half of my kingdom I swear to grant it!"

And the frivolous maiden, wishing to please her mother, demanded the head of John the Baptist, the holy Precursor, in return for a graceful dance—as she might have demanded a crown of flowers! Herod, though he experienced some remorse in granting it, nevertheless acceded to her request. What matters the price that is paid to the god of pleasure?

This odious murder gave a craving for blood to those who revolted against the chaste and severe morals of the Saviour. Alas! Since the time of Abel the good have always been odious to the wicked. The good will ever be odious to the wicked until the end of the world. Let him die! breathed Cain, the first murderer. Let Him die! now murmured the Doctors of the Law. He *must* die! whispered the Pharisees, whose unyielding sect could neither admit nor understand the merciful doctrine of Jesus Christ! He *shall* die! cried the fierce Sadducees, and all those whose conduct He had condemned or whose pride He had crushed.

* * * * *

But now Mary was to see her Beloved on Mount Thabor. She observed the divinity of Christ absorbing His humanity. That infirm and perishable body in which man had been shut up since the Fall,

and with which the Saviour had clothed Himself to suffer, appeared to her transfigured into that glorious, impalpable and luminous body which He was to carry to heaven after His resurrection.

“His face did shine as the sun, and His garments became white as snow; and behold, there approached Moses and Elias talking with Him.”²

Often, before this, had Mary gazed upon divine visions, but now she was compelled to lower her eyes in the presence of such splendor. Then she perceived the disciples. They had fallen on their faces to the earth, their senses too feeble to sustain such a sublime spectacle.

But the Virgin, fortified, it may be, by a ray of her Son's glory, again fixed her gaze upon Him, becoming inebriated with the happiness of thus contemplating the divine Word in all His glory. And, as He shone with a brightness far more dazzling than that of the sun, the harmony of the spheres rolling in space struck upon her senses with majestic music, accompanying a voice—the mighty voice of the all-powerful God, which said: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”³

Then everything became silent, and the Saviour again permitted man's nature to weigh upon Him, like the garment of a slave. Approaching His disciples, who were filled with dread and admiration, Mary heard Him reassure them, in His mild voice.

² St. Matthew xvii, 2, 3.

³ Ibid., 5.

After that the Mother felt that her Son's goodness and beauty seemed even more wonderful to the Apostles. They saw Him, as it were, in a halo of light. His miracles acquired a rarer dignity; even as they reached the foot of Mount Thabor our blessed Lord cured the lunatic child, and later the ten lepers were made whole; He gave sight to the man born blind, and healed, on the Sabbath day, the man afflicted with dropsy.

Our Lady saw Lazarus emerge from his tomb. She felt the great joy of his sisters, Martha and Mary, and that sweeter joy which Lazarus himself experienced when he observed upon the cheek of his beloved friend and Master, the sparkling tear which sanctified their holy affection.

And in the Virgin's heart was a great tenderness toward him over whom her Son had wept, and toward the sisters who had had such faith: "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died!"⁴

But alas! His divinity was only visible to the ones who loved Him. The blind and ignorant hatred of those who found in the conduct and teaching of Jesus the condemnation of their licentious and depraved lives increased from day to day, and at last became diabolical.

* * * * *

One morning, the Angel Gabriel, that bright spirit who had brought to Mary the sweetest, holiest mes-

⁴ St. John xi, 21.

sage ever delivered upon this earth, approached her humble dwelling.

"It is time," he said. "Arise, O Mother! Come to assist at His last triumphs, ere following Him in His last sorrows!"

And the glorious wings of the angel trembled as the pinions of a bird tremble before the coming of the tempest.

"The moment of expiation is near," he added. "The chaff is separated from the grain; the wicked are uniting as one man. The prophecies are to be accomplished."

Oh, heart of the Mother! How it shook within her when she heard these words! Her cheeks paled, her form trembled. She suffered, suffered as the Mother of the Saviour . . . ah, but more wonderful to relate, she suffered as the Mother of the human race.

"There exist, then, upon this earth," she exclaimed, "creatures wicked enough to put to death the One who has come to redeem them! Who is more innocent than Jesus? The best, the most patient, the most merciful of men! What favors He has bestowed upon those who surround Him, those who follow Him! And yet these men, these, the creatures of God, will deliver their God to death!"

So lamented the Mother of sorrows, gazing at the angel as if beseeching that heavenly spirit to tell her that her Son was not to perish by the hand of man.

But the Angel hid his face.

“He Himself wishes to die . . . that His blood may wash away the stain of sin!”

And then the Angel and the Mother knelt, humbling themselves before the mystery of love—Mary comprehending, by the power of God, the depth of the malice of fallen man, and the extent of his degradation, which, in her wondrous and unique innocence, she had never yet been able to understand.

CHAPTER XXIX

MARY MEETS THE YOUNG MAN WHO WAS BLIND

WHEN the Angel Gabriel had left her, Mary sought the Magdalen.

"We will depart," she said, in her mild and gentle tones. "We will follow, while we may, the Son of God, and water His footprints with our tears."

The sinner who had been called Magdalen was now Magdalen the saint. Her heart had been purified by her repentance, and this sincerity rendered her very dear to the Blessed Mother. She had risen from her fall, wearing the bright robe of a new innocence—that robe with which the angels clothe the sorrowful penitent.

The other Mary, Salome, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, and several other noble-hearted women also wished to accompany her. Cleophas, too, went with them.

That evening they set forth. When Mary passed over the threshold of her dwelling, she turned to salute it, as the departing soul salutes, it may be, its mortal remains when leaving them.

"Farewell, dear abode! Many graces, many joys

have been mine under thy beloved roof," she said. "Here have my father and mother smiled upon me. Here did the angelic voices sound within my ears. Here," she crossed her arms upon her pure bosom, "the Messenger of heaven announced that happiness with which the Eternal was about to overwhelm His humble servant!

"Oh, how beautiful were those days! What raptures overflowed my heart! Blessed be God who has bestowed them upon me!

"And whatever may be the horror that is still to come, the remembrance of God's gifts to me shall never be effaced. No claims have I upon Him, yet He has loaded me with favors. May His name be blessed!

"Farewell, dear roof, dear room, dear dwelling! Is there none to care for you in memory of those wonders which have transpired within your walls?"

And she sent a last look to the sacred places which she loved. Immediately the door of her little cell opened as if wafted by a gentle breeze; the harmonious vibration of the angels' wings sounded in her ears; the sweet perfume of lilies saluted her. So did the Virgin understand that this beloved house of Nazareth was to remain under the guardianship of the heavenly spirits, and when she turned away, her heart soared up to God in an infinite transport of thanksgiving. Perhaps she hoped that her exile upon earth would not be prolonged after her divine Son's death.

Whatever might have been her thoughts she was calm as ever, her beautiful countenance serene in its mild and saintly majesty.

The little band journeyed for some time before they found Jesus. He had finished preaching in Galilee, and had gone toward Jerusalem, but everywhere they found evidences that He had preceded them along the road.

Here He had forgiven the sins of the astonished and confused woman of Samaria. There He had healed the paralytic who had been sick for thirty years. Farther on they met some of those who had followed Him into the desert, and had witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, when He took pity on the famished multitudes—even as He was soon to multiply, without end and without measure, the divine Body and precious Blood, which was to feed, after His death to the end of the ages, so many souls famishing for everlasting life.

Mary listened with eagerness to these stories, and followed the traces of her Son's passage, the new Conqueror, whose feet did not tread the way of devastation, sorrow, or death, but of peace, happiness, and life. And the Virgin blessed those upon whom the Saviour had allowed His blessed eyes to rest, and even those places which He had hallowed by His presence.

They were about a day's journey from Jerusalem when they halted for the noon-hour meal. A young man was seated upon a rock near the fountain and

as they prepared their food close by they could not help observing him.

He was a handsome youth, and his countenance bore a singular expression—a mixture of joy and curiosity. He appeared, moreover, lost in contemplation of the beautiful landscape that was spread before his eyes. Even the presence of strangers did not serve to interrupt him. He looked at the sky, at the earth, the rivulet at his feet, at everything that surrounded him. Some flowers hung above his head. He gathered them in his hands, and seemed to take exquisite pleasure in examining them. An old dog sat near by, watching him uneasily, as if astonished at each movement of its master.

Mary and her fellow travelers had rested for some time under the palm-trees. As they conversed they could not help noticing the young man, with surprise and with pleasure, too, for he appeared extraordinarily happy. Cleophas at last, raising his voice, said in friendly fashion:

“Good stranger, you evidently are not a dweller in this country, for you examine all about you as if you had never seen them before. Will you not cease for a moment admiring nature’s beauty and partake of our repast? The blessings which the Lord has bestowed upon us we would share with our brethren.”

The young man turned upon Cleophas a pair of large and beautifully clear blue eyes. He looked at him a moment, and then upon those who ac-

accompanied him. After which, smiling, he rose. But, almost involuntarily, it seemed, he extended both hands before him as if feeling his way; and the dog rose, too, and walked in front of him, dragging a chain.

"You love such scenes as these?" asked the Virgin, sympathetically.

"Love!" echoed the stranger. "Ah! I can not pass a single moment without admiring them. Whether the sun shines upon them or night enshrouds them, I feel that I can never look my fill."

Seeing that those to whom he spoke smiled slightly, he added:

"You have seen all these things since you were born. You do not comprehend how truly beautiful they are!"

"Why not?" asked Cleophas. "Have not you also beheld them?"

Mary approached nearer, with a presentiment of some new marvel.

"No," replied the young man, and his voice trembled from excess of emotion. "No, I saw none of them . . . until now. I have never seen anything. I have been blind from birth."

"Who has restored your sight?" asked Mary. But before he answered her she knew.

"A man called Jesus," the youth replied, joyously. "He saw me as He passed, and He saw that I was blind. And some of those who were with Him said:

“‘‘Rabbi, who hath sinned—this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’’’

“‘‘And then?’’’ urged Mary, trembling.

“‘‘And then Jesus answered: ‘Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.’’’¹

“‘‘When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle, and spread the clay upon my eyes and said to me: ‘Go—wash in the pool of Siloe.’’’

“‘‘I went, therefore, and washed, and came, seeing.’’’²

Cleophas and the others examined him with joy and surprise. Then, raising their hands to heaven, they praised the great Jehovah.

“‘‘You at least believe me, and thank the Lord with me,’’ said the young man, gently. “‘‘There are many who will *not* believe! And it grieves me, for I want all to know it, all to believe it, that Jesus may be adored!’’’

“‘‘The power of God will manifest itself,’’ murmured Mary, softly.

“‘‘You have really been blind since your birth?’’’ asked Cleophas.

“‘‘I have been blind since my birth,’’ answered the young man. “‘‘I have lived in that dark night of which none can comprehend the gloom unless he has experienced it. Oh, to see . . . nothing! To have

¹ St. John ix, 2, 3.

² *Ibid.*, 6, 7.

the image of . . . nothing! Chaos! To be acquainted with naught save by sound! The sun, the flowers, color, have no sound—and I knew none of these!

“But now I behold the sun in the blue heavens! I have looked upon the stars! I have seen my mother’s smile! Your faces speak to me. They tell me that you rejoice in my happiness! Everything is so beautiful, so brilliant, so magnificent! I see you! I am no longer solitary! I see the fields, the grass, the wonders which God has poured out upon this earth to gladden the eyes of men! I see, I see! How good He is! How I love Him!”

Mary and the other women looked at one another. A tender smile played about the Mother’s lips. As for the young man, in his exultant joy he seemed to have fallen into a sort of ecstasy.

“Ah, look at these flowers! Examine these blades of grass, and this silvery foliage. Look at this translucent water. It lives and flows like a serpent amid the ferns. How the birds glitter in the sun! How golden bright the wings of the insects buzzing around us . . .” He noted their smiles, and added tremulously: “Oh, if you do not understand my happiness you can not feel as I do. Let me see! See all, everything! Contemplate everything! Admire everything! Nature belongs to me, since my sight has been restored. I can see!”

And he raised his arms toward heaven.

The holy Virgin looked at him with her sweet and

penetrating glance. Yet she was not thinking of him. Her heart was with her Son, her God, the Author of all good.

The poor dog had followed all the actions of its master with the greatest uneasiness. Now, as the youth seated himself near the little group, the tears were coursing down his cheeks. The dog clambered to his lap, and thence put its paws upon his shoulder, looking into his face. Then with a sharp, short bark, it jumped to the ground and began to describe joyous circles around him. Returning to him again and again, it would look up into his face, bark once more, and resume its gambols.

The young man called him and caressed him.

"You also, my good, faithful friend! Why, what a pleasure it is to look at you! See how glad it is with me! Since my cure it has been most uneasy, and at each step has barked as if to warn me of danger." He looked about him, caressing the dog's ears. "How beautiful Life is! I shall know naught but happiness as long as I live."

He was silent a few moments.

"And that happiness is one which none can know in its entirety save myself. I have but one fear . . . a dread fear. I will die and lose the sun. I shall close my eyes . . . will all be dark again?"

Mary bent toward him.

"Do not be afraid," she said. "Death will not plunge you into darkness. There are far greater joys beyond its portals. You will find the light of heaven

so much the brighter, that you will consider this brightness to have been obscurity."

The young man shook his head.

"It is difficult to believe," he said. "And yet . . . he who would have told me, during my darkness, of the beauty which I now behold . . . well, I would have doubted him. I understand. The power of God is infinite. I believe, hope, await all."

And the Virgin answered:

"Love God. Keep your heart pure. Remain grateful . . . and there is no hope which shall not be accomplished."

* * * * *

They left the youth behind them when they set out for Jerusalem. Everywhere people talked of the new Prophet, the new Christ. But the louder the acclamations the more sorrowful became the Virgin.

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE HOUSE OF SIMON

ON the outskirts of Jerusalem Mary of Magdala still possessed a little house, toward which they turned, seeking its shelter for the Mother of God and her companions. Quite suddenly after her joyous transports, deep sadness had fallen upon the Virgin. She had seen too well in her secret soul what the triumphs of her Son preceded. When she reached the house of Magdalen her trembling limbs could scarcely support her. Salome, Mary of Cleophas, and Joanna were alarmed. They knelt at her feet, kissing her hands, and weeping.

“Daughter of David! Mother of the Saviour!” they exclaimed. “What has cast down thy courageous soul?”

“Alas!” said Our Lady, mournfully. “There are treason and hatred at His very side! Terror has taken possession of me!”

She sank back upon the couch and closed her eyes, and her companions sat looking at her with anxiety. And then angels slowly descended: faint harmonies reached them.

“He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and shall be dumb as a lamb before the shearer and He shall not open His mouth. He will be offered because it is His own will; the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of all.”¹ “Many are they who rise up against Him.”² “They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent: the venom of asps is under their lips.”³ “The council of the malignant hath besieged Him.”⁴

Then came a voice that sounded faint and far away.

“O My people, what have I done to thee, or in what have I molested thee? Answer thou Me. For I have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and delivered thee out of the house of slaves.⁵ Dost thou now prepare a cross for Me? Because for forty years have I conducted thee in the desert, where I fed thee with manna, and because I have made thee enter a fertile land, dost thou prepare a cross for thy Saviour? What is there that I ought to do more than I have done?”

And so the angels surrounded Mary. The harmonies died away. Silence descended. Silence deep and profound. Sleep closed the eyelids of the weary Mother, and God clothed her soul with strength for the trial which lay before her.

Magdalen waited until she was sure that the

¹ Isaias liii, 6, 7.

² Psalms iii, 2, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, cxxxix, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi, 17.

⁵ Micheas vi, 3, 4.

Virgin slept, and until the other women had retired to rest. Then she left the house. She had concealed under her veil a vase of alabaster, exquisite in workmanship, which was filled with oil of spikenard, a most rare perfume and one of great price. Learning the place to which Jesus had retired, she went to the borough of Bethania, to the house of Simon the leper—since she had been told that she would find Him there. He was indeed within, seated with His disciples in a lofty and richly decorated hall, for Simon was a rich Pharisee and lived in great opulence.

Magdalen entered the hall trembling. The room was spacious and hung with purple. All the guests reclined, according to custom, about the table, upon slightly raised but magnificent couches. She paused, her eyes seeking Jesus, who was in the place of honor, between John and Simon the Pharisee. He was conversing with them, and upon His face shone the brilliant light which had transfigured it at the marriage feast of Cana. For a moment she stood—not daring to advance. It seemed to her that she was penetrating into the Holy of holies, into which even the High Priest entered with fear and trembling. Then the sound of Jesus' voice fell upon her ears. She recalled the words which she had heard Him repeat: "Come to Me, all ye that are heavily laden and oppressed, and I will refresh you."

The recollection emboldened her. She advanced, and sinking upon her knees beside the couch, she

broke the precious vase and poured the perfume it contained upon the Saviour's feet.

Instantly the sweetness of its odor spread throughout the room, and permeated the entire house, arresting the attention of the guests. Jesus bent grave and merciful eyes upon her, but when she met that glance—the pitying glance of a God and a Father, she could not endure it. Tears welled forth—tears that followed the perfume, and lifting her beautiful hair—her only glory since she had given up the world of luxury in which she had reigned a queen—she wiped them away.

Simon had known Magdalen in the days of her folly, and now he started up, wishing to remove her from the presence of Jesus. But Jesus saw what immense love filled this heart. It had remained void and cold in the midst of unholy passions, but now it burned with a heavenly fire.

Some among them—Judas Iscariot was of the number—grumbled at seeing the waste of so precious a perfume, the price of which would have helped many poor people.

And Jesus turned to them.

“Why do you trouble this woman? For she hath wrought a good work upon Me. The poor you have always with you—but Me you have not always.

“For she, in pouring this ointment upon My body, hath done it for My burial.”⁶

⁶ St. Matthew xxvi, 10-12.

Magdalen heard these words, and a great sob broke in her throat.

“Go in peace,” said Jesus, in His gentlest voice.

A celestial joy descended upon the troubled soul of Magdalen, and filled her whole being, even as the precious oil of spikenard had filled the whole house with perfume.

Judas, one of the Twelve, rose in great agitation and left the table, for the speech aroused fear within him. It was this man whose presence near Jesus terrified the heart of the holy Virgin. Impulsive, rude, and vindictive, he was jealous of every preference as if he alone had merited it, and he bore a violent envy toward those who gained the affection of others. The regard that was not bestowed upon him offended him.

Against Jesus he nourished a secret hatred on account of the tenderness which He displayed toward John, the beloved disciple. Jealousy, a desire of revenge, devoured his soul like birds of prey, for such evil passions are the vultures of the heart.

Nevertheless, the Saviour’s words of peace and mercy had moved him. For an instant, he, too, was impelled to cast himself at the feet of the divine and blessed One who forgave sins with such benignity. His guardian angel, in that dread moment, redoubled most fervent prayers for his unfortunate soul, and whispered sweet counsels in his wavering heart. But the wretch had listened so long to the spirit of darkness, had yielded so long to the promptings

of the devil, that in this crucial moment Satan could easily excite him anew. For as he stood irresolute, he saw John lean toward Jesus to address Him, and the fair head of the beloved disciple rested against the Master's cheek.

This goodness, these graces, which Judas saw the Saviour shedding upon those surrounding Him; this quietude, this peace, the calm and serene beauty of these young men, vivified by divine love; the gentleness, mildness, and affection from which he perceived that he was excluded by hateful and base passions, increased his jealousy. Yielding to the suggestions of the spirit of darkness, he stole out of the banquet-room.

Magdalen left the house of Simon the Pharisee and returned to Mary. Seated at the Mother's knee she told her what happened, and Mary stretched out her arms, and thanked her.

"Magdalen!" she exclaimed. "Why is not the whole earth filled with the love that animates your soul? That which the Lord, in His goodness, has done for you, He has accomplished for all men. He has come to give them a law of love and mercy. Who has ever practised as He does the sublime virtue of universal charity which He came on earth to preach? And for such love as this the hatred of the world increases. Who could believe it?"

Magdalen's tears had not ceased to flow since her eyes rested on her beloved Master. They welled up anew now, as she said:

“Is it not because it is necessary, as you have told me, that Christ should suffer and die to redeem the earth and restore its glory?”

“Yes,” said Mary. “The decrees must be accomplished. Evil having entered into the world, its effects are foreseen from all eternity, and the prophecies are to be accomplished.”

The Virgin, in speaking thus, felt the most bitter anguish. But identifying herself then, as ever, with her divine Son, she murmured:

“My God! May Thy will, not mine, be done!”

CHAPTER XXXI

JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM

THE following day—the day of festival—the little band of holy people who so dearly loved Jesus, started out once more. He had left Bethania, and gone to Jerusalem, and as they wended their way thither, the miracles He had performed met them, like precious flowers strewn along the path. As they approached, the people seemed to grow more numerous and the farther on they went the denser became the throng, so that they could not get into the city.

At last Cleophas inquired the cause of this extraordinary assemblage. He learned that they were awaiting Jesus. Followed by Mary Magdalen, the other Mary, and Salome, the Mother mingled in the crowd, anticipating, like any of the women about her, the coming of her Son.

Soon she saw the disciples in the distance. Among them she distinguished Simon, whom she had known at Cana. He marched, proud of his Master, and proud of his own strength, his virtue, his unconquerable courage. Bartholomew followed. Mary

had known him also in Galilee. Then came James and Jude, and John, the beloved one. The other Mary could have cried aloud with joy on again beholding her sons, but she blessed them in her heart, and allowed them to pass in silence. Other disciples preceded the Saviour, and their faces were sad. The great crowd of people, the acclamations, did not reassure them. They knew too well that such transports but aroused the anger of the great. Already the murmurings in high places seemed to threaten Him.

“This man preaches for the people,” they said. “Why? Because He comes from the people! Because He wishes to make partisans that He may foment rebellion! He will bear watching!”

Aware of this sentiment against Him and filled with uneasiness, they walked before their Master.

At last the Virgin saw her Son.

He rode upon a colt, on which no man before Him ever had been seated. She looked at Him, feasting her eyes upon His face. Most beautiful of men! Power, force, mildness, bounty, intelligence, compassion, love, mercy, gentleness—every virtue, every gift, every faculty in its most perfect state, was mirrored there. And on this day, this one day of triumph, they shone with superhuman splendor.

And the people saluted their Saviour as if He were indeed their earthly King. They cast flowers in His path. They spread costly garments on the ground that the feet of the animal He rode might not touch

the earth. They carried palm branches in their hands, waving them joyously.

“Hosanna!” they cried. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”¹

“Hosanna in the heavens!

“Glory in the highest heavens!”

And the entire people cried out with one voice.

“Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord!”

The voices of adoring angels mingled in these acclamations, and every lip repeated the wonders that had been wrought by Jesus.

One told of the resurrection of Lazarus, and how those few words from the Saviour had drawn him forth from the tomb—that man whose body had already been the prey of worms and rottenness. They pointed him out, following in the Saviour’s train.

Another spoke of the cure of one who had been long a paralytic and showed him among the friends of Jesus. He was full of life and strength, although he had made a long journey.

A woman recalled tenderly His kindness to her little ones.

“Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not,” He had said, “for of such is the kingdom of God.”² “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hath come perfect praise.”

¹ St. Matthew xxi, 9.

² St. Mark x, 14.

And the mother kissed the fair heads of her boys, upon which the Lord had for a moment placed His hands. The Virgin looked at them with interest, thinking within her heart that at some future period these children would bear witness to the high favor they had received.

Others spoke of the marvelous doctrines which Jesus gave to a listening multitude.

“His sanctity raises us from the abjection into which we have fallen. His laws are in favor of the weak, and the oppressed. He thinks of us poor ones, who are enduring the burden and the hardships of life. Who thought or cared before Him? He consoles our miseries, saying that God has counted them, and will give us recompense if we bear them without murmuring. He is poor, so that we may know how to suffer poverty. Of Himself He spoke when He said those words: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head.””³

“He possesses nothing who can give everything. He tells the rich that their wealth is theirs in trust, only that they may assist us. If it ever happens that they listen to Him, we will have to know but the indispensable evils of life. He is truly the God who made us, before whom all are equal!”

And a woman added:

“He wishes woman to be no longer treated as the

³ St. Luke ix, 58.

slave of man, but as his companion. He wishes the son to love and venerate his mother. He loves and venerates His own Mother. Let Him be blessed! Hosanna to Him on earth and in heaven!"

The Virgin heard these words—they were spoken close beside her. Her heart leaped with joy—the joy of a mother, a joy which included her Son, and all who loved her Son, in an immense and maternal affection.

"May God bless His people!" she exclaimed, and as the words left her lips a gust of wind raised her veil. Several, whose attention was attracted by her remark, beheld her beautiful countenance. Instantly her resemblance to the Saviour was commented upon.

"This is His Mother! Surely this is His Mother!" they exclaimed.

Mary hurriedly drew her veil about her, and sought refuge behind Magdalen; so dense was the crowd that they had no difficulty in losing themselves in it. Following, or preceding the Virgin, Magdalen, herself concealed, saw many of those whom she had known in Jerusalem. Once her shoulder almost touched that of Joseph of Arimathea, and she noted his sad and thoughtful countenance. To her surprise Servilius was with him.

"Do you not see that this triumph will lead to His ruin?" asked Joseph, sorrowfully, of the young Roman.

"The fault will be His own!" was the answer.

“Why does He display His triumph under the eyes of the governor and those in high places who fear the influence He exercises over the people? Why did He not remain in Galilee instead of coming here to compromise His partisans?”

“I believed you to be one of His trusted disciples,” said Joseph of Arimathea, wonderingly.

Carried forward by the crowd Magdalen did not hear the reply. But Servilius’ countenance told its own tale. He had always wavered between courage and interest, and he had not the strength to sacrifice one for the other.

“Weak, weak Servilius!” she murmured. “Never has thy soul known true elevation or generosity.”

But the crowd had entered the city. The acclamations were redoubled. The sight of Lazarus, of whose resurrection all were talking, sent the dense throng into greater enthusiasm. Flowers and palm branches were cast upon the ground, making the Lord’s way the path of a conqueror. But never had any conqueror excited such transports.

The shouts and cries of joy penetrated to the palace of Caiphas and made him tremble with rage. He had never forgotten or forgiven that earlier Pasch in which Jesus had whipped the buyers and sellers out of the Temple. “Take these things hence,” He had said, “and make not of My Father’s house a house of traffic!”⁴

⁴ St. John ii, 15, 16.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HIGH PRIESTS HOLD A CONFERENCE

CERTAIN it was that Caiphas, the High Priest for that year, cherished a violent resentment against Jesus. He complained haughtily that the Nazarene arrogated to Himself that right and authority which belonged to others. And when, after His triumph, Jesus expelled, for the second time, the vendors from the Temple, that hatred was fanned to a white heat: "My house shall be called the house of prayer. . . . But you have made it a den of thieves," He said.

For a long time Caiphas had planned the punishment of the Prophet, but found himself checked on every hand; and not being able to do as he wished in the matter, his anger was but augmented. The cries of joy, the shouts of delight which had filled the streets of Jerusalem, and which had been carried to him on every breeze, so loud and so prolonged that it seemed as if they would never cease, fed his rage with such intensity that he felt as if he could no longer contain it. So he ordered the officers of the palace to his side, and sent them in haste throughout the town, bidding them call together the Doctors of

the Law, the Scribes, the chiefs of the Pharisees, as well as the princes of the Priests. He assembled them in council.

“What are we to do?” he asked, in the heat of his passionate anger. “You heard these clamors? Shall we suffer this? Jesus, who calls Himself a Prophet, draws all after Him! If we allow Him to master the multitude, the people will believe in Him. Already in the public places and in the crossroads the mob is crying: ‘Blessed is He who cometh in the name of the Lord!’ Publicly the people call Him the Messias! Suppose they revolt in His favor? What will happen? The Romans will come and destroy our country and our nation!”

He stopped to observe the effect of his words. Those who listened were much calmer than he wished—for Caiphias had already won the disfavor of some of them by adverse judgments. He continued:

“We have been divided in opinion, true, and even have not thought alike upon some points of doctrine. But a common danger threatens us, and we must face it united. This Nazarene is your enemy as well as mine!”

He turned to the Scribes and the Pharisees.

“What does He say of you?” he sneered. “Wo to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you are like to whited sepulchers, which outwardly appear to men beautiful, but within are full of dead men’s bones, and of all filthiness. Wo to you, wo to you! That upon you may come all the just blood

that hath been shed upon the earth, from the blood of Abel the just, even unto the blood of Zacharias, the son of Barachias, whom you killed between the temple and the altar.'¹

"Also has He said of you: 'The Scribes and the Pharisees have sitten on the chair of Moses. All things, therefore, whatsoever they shall say to you, observe and do: but according to their works do ye not; for they say and do not.

"'For they bind heavy and insupportable burdens, and lay them on men's shoulders: but with a finger of their own they will not move them.'"²

In a moment he saw that he had roused the Scribes and Pharisees. Stronger than their disagreement with Caiphas was their hatred of the just One. He turned then, to the Priests and Doctors.

"Our altars are abandoned since this Man began to teach His mad doctrine, which overthrows our own. How many times hath He pronounced anathemas against us? 'Wo to you, blind guides!' He cries. What respect have the people for you—you who alone ought to be heard!—since He comes to the Temple to teach? He blames your doctrine, mocking you in your own words: 'Whosoever shall swear by the Temple, it is nothing; but he that shall swear by the gold of the Temple is a debtor!'

"And if you had heard, as I have just heard, the bitter irony with which this Galilean added: 'Ye

¹ St. Matthew xxiii, 27, 35.

² *Ibid.*, 2, 4.

blind! For whether is greater, the gold, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?'³ He makes Himself King! He makes Himself Priest! He makes Himself Doctor! He arrogates our powers to Himself, holding us up for derision. Shall we suffer it?"

"No, no, no!" cried out with one voice the Scribes, Pharisees, Priests, and Doctors of the Law. "He is a disturber of public and private peace. Let Him be punished as He deserves!"

"Agreed! We shall forget our dissensions, since all are threatened as one man. Let us have but one object now—the silencing of the Nazarene. Only His death can effect this."

And the hatred of each added fuel to the hatred of all.

They decided to be rid of the Saviour as soon as it could be accomplished, but it was necessary to find some means of seizing Him. They feared an outbreak of sedition among the innumerable multitudes that followed Him, and were then assembled at Jerusalem, for the Feast of the Passover was near at hand.

* * * * *

While these men sat plotting the death of our blessed Lord, His triumphs continued. Mary followed Him, her heart filled to overflowing with pure worship, and delight, not unmingled with sorrow, in the praises which were being showered upon Him from all sides.

³ St. Matthew xxiii, 16, 17.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE COUNCIL

TOWARD dusk a new council was held in the palace of the High Priest, Caiphas. The princes of the Priests, the officers of the Temple, the Doctors of the Law, the ancients of the people—all those who had premeditated the death of Jesus, united now to find the means of destroying Him.

One just man, Joseph of Arimathea, in secret a disciple of the Saviour, was there also. He had not been present during the first council, although a Doctor of the Law.

“This Man whom you wish to condemn does not seem a criminal to me,” he said. “What is His guilt? He is touched by the miseries of the people, and seeks to appease and console them—not by deceitful hopes of riches and happiness, which can only be realized by revolting against the laws and authorities, but by the innocent and peaceful hopes of death.

“What is reprehensible in this? To us who are rich and great, who are fed, perhaps unjustly, on the fat of the land, He has said we are not to amass treasures that the moth and rust can consume. If

we were to follow these precepts, as wise as they are humane, the poor would suffer less, and would hate us less. What evil do you find in such instructions as these? I find none."

"The real evil is that He flatters the people in order to make Himself head," rejoined Caiphas, hotly. "To overthrow the Law; to destroy the respect which ought to be entertained for us, casting anathema both on our acts and our conduct. He fascinates the crowd by seditious speeches. Works false miracles to gain their affections! An impostor! Whose fallacious doctrines are to be condemned, since He plots against our personal security and against the security of the state."

Joseph saw, with alarm, that the *real* evil was the fear which Jesus had inspired in the hearts of these men. He tried to defend Him, but he knew how useless it was. The great never pardon those who cause them to tremble.

"But He is peaceable," he continued. "He is poor and He could have riches. He prays when He could menace. He commands patience and pardon of injuries. He returns good for evil, love for hatred. He would not crush the smallest worm. He would not extinguish the tiniest spark. And can you not recall how, in His boyhood, He astonished our intelligence by the force and sublimity of His doctrines?"

"And is He not right? Should we not examine everything? Should we not combat all that is

contrary to the Law? I have followed Him, I have tested His doctrine. The wisest of men could not, in a single instance, object to it. I have witnessed His miracles. I affirm to you that they are acts of love and mercy."

Seeing that some were listening to him with close attention, hope arose in Joseph's heart.

"Call to remembrance also, my brethren, the fact that He is loved by all, and that His partisans are united at Jerusalem for the feasts of the Passover, from which, as you see, He does not lead them. How would you attack Him in the midst of this crowd, which follows Him, and believes Him to be the Messiah promised to the people of Israel? You said in the first council, I believe, that a revolt would occur in His favor if you permitted Him to live. Fear, instead, that the revolt will break out at once if you seek to seize Him in order to kill Him. Be guided by reason. Do not court certain peril to avoid one that does not threaten you. Precipitate nothing. Continue to examine His speech—"

He spoke warmly. He began to hope that he might turn the tide in favor of the Nazarene.

But at that very moment Judas Iscariot arrived upon the scene. He half-opened the door of the council-room. His eyes were wild, his face haggard, he was breathless. And he stood still, saying nothing.

"Who has given thee authority to enter here?" demanded Caiphas, recognizing him as one of the

Twelve. (So they were called who continually followed Jesus.) "Dost thou come to spy upon us, that thou mayest repeat our words to thy Master?"

"I do not come to spy upon you," said Judas, contemptuously. "What need has He of spies? Does He not know everything that passes in heaven or upon earth? I have long believed it and it may be so, but," he added, with a terrible smile, "He knows not what passes in hearts."

"What do you mean?" demanded Joseph of Arimathea. Judas' manner inspired him with dread.

"If He had been able to read the heart He would never have allowed me to approach Him."

"Why not?" continued Joseph, anxious to distract the attention of his fellows. "Perhaps He believed that His goodness toward thee would enkindle repentance."

A cold sweat broke out on the forehead of the traitor. He cast savage glances about him, and his burning hands clutched convulsively at his mantle.

"What does it matter?" he asked huskily. "Whether He could or could not read the depth of the heart? He has wounded me and I have left Him."

"Thou hast left Him!" cried Caiphas. He and several others approached nearer to Judas.

"Thou hast left Him?" repeated Joseph with indignation. "Wretch, what comest thou here to do?"

"Friend, what comest thou here to do?" asked Caiphias, in a soft, insinuating tone.

"Let me breathe," said Judas. "I am suffocated. I have walked so quickly."

It was not the walking that made his breathing difficult. Judas was a powerful and indefatigable man, who could have marched from Jerusalem to Joppe without losing breath. No. It was that sudden oppression of spirit which seizes upon the heart, overpowering it, when a crime of such dread import is about to be committed.

"Well, then, we shall listen," said one of the Doctors, and the whole council seated itself in order to hear him.

"I come," said Judas, in a steady tone, "to offer to betray unto you, secretly, Jesus, the Nazarene."

"Infamous ingrate!" exclaimed Joseph.

But the others, rising at once, surrounded the traitor.

"If you do this you will merit well of your country," said Caiphias. "Your name will be famous from age to age."

"As the name of Cain is famous," said a voice in the crowd. It was lost in the midst of the interested encouragement of Priests and Doctors.

"What is the price you would set upon your treachery?" asked Joseph in a tone of contempt.

Judas looked at him with resentment, but Caiphias had no intention of letting such an opportunity as this slip by. They made Judas seat himself, and

presently Joseph heard the bargain being concluded. The traitor agreed to deliver Jesus for thirty pieces of silver—the price for which the death of a slave was bought among the Hebrews.

During this frightful bargaining, hell leaped with joy, and the devil in the soul of Judas saw the accomplishment of his dearest desire. All the chiefs of the damned accompanied him, and rejoiced around him—for the children of darkness live in an ever-present, blind hatred and the future is hidden from them.

They hate the just, and behold the accomplishment of a crime with as much pleasure as the angels of light view with joy a noble and generous act. But had it been able to see the future, hell would have been shaken to its depths. For this crime was to limit its power and set bounds to its daring.

The Priests and Doctors applauded the deed of this wretched being. He swore to deliver Jesus into their hands on the following day, and they paid him the money agreed upon.

At that very moment the evil spirits came forth from the abyss. They spread themselves upon the earth. Bad passions were loosed. Trouble entered into every soul. At once a combat arose; for the celestial angels redoubled their solicitude, striving to make their voices heard by those with whose guardianship they were entrusted.

They spoke of the joys of heaven and the horrors of hell of the promises of God, and of His threats;

of the joys of the elect, and of the wailings and gnashings of teeth of the reprobate. They wept and moaned, and strove to bring back those who went astray.

But the fallen angel laughed derisively at the works of God, at His menaces and His promises.

“What matters the future? Is not life its own goal? To pass through it happily is all that need be sought after.”

So they promised to some the favor of Cæsar if the impostor were destroyed. To others the favor of the tetrarch if this object of his fears should be taken from before his eyes. To superiors the favor of the prince's favorites; to the lowest some object of ambition or cupidity—that ever powerful bait which the rebellious angel has successfully employed to lure souls to destruction.

At a distance the world continued to be plunged in the same distractions, giving itself up to works of foolishness, to ephemeral joys, to brute pleasures, to agitations ending in death. And the destiny of the human race was here decided, in this small corner of Judea—between a God, a voluntary victim—and His blind creatures.

And Mary, with the gift which her Son had bestowed upon her intensified in this atmosphere of hate and anger and bitterness, cast a look of sorrow upon the Magdalen.

“It has come,” she murmured. “The Son of God has been betrayed.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST SUPPER

THUS passed this night, and the whole of the day following.

The Virgin wished to go to the Temple, where Jesus was giving His last instructions. She set out, but so dense was the crowd that she could make no headway. She remained, however, until her Son had passed, wishing once more, if possible, to look upon His face. This wish was granted.

His beautiful countenance was so calm, so joyful, that Mary's heart was weighed down with grief in her bosom. It was so serene, she knew, because the God-man realized that the great Sacrifice was on the verge of being accomplished, and only her unalterable submission to the will of God was able to sustain her.

With the women who accompanied her she turned back to Magdalen's dwelling, and there all united in prayer, in order that, on this day of sorrow and mourning, the name of the Lord might be remembered.

Toward evening the Virgin seemed exhausted by sorrow. Magdalen's tender heart felt that it must do something to assuage her grief, or ease her anguish.

“Do you not wish me to pass through the town and discover what is being said or done? In former days my friends were many here—they may be able to give me the information I seek.”

Mary looked at her kind comforter.

“Do you think that I could remain away from His side if I knew not what was transpiring? Ah, Magdalen, one by one the prophecies are being accomplished. The voices of the prophets are sounding in my ears. . . . All, all that has been said by vision is now about to be verified.”

* * * * *

Voice of Isaias

“And He shall grow up as a tender plant before Him, and as a root out of a thirsty ground. There is no beauty in Him, or comeliness, and we have seen Him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of Him.

“Despised and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity.

“Surely He hath borne our infirmities, and carried our sorrows: and we have thought Him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted.

“But He was wounded for our iniquities, He was bruised for our sins; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His bruises we are healed. . . .

“The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”¹

¹ Isaias liii, 2-6.

Voice of Jeremias

“ To what shall I compare thee, or to what shall I liken thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? to what shall I equal thee, that I may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Sion?”²

Voice of Isaias

“ He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer, and He shall not open His mouth.”³

Voice of Jeremias

“ O Daughter of Jerusalem, to what shall I equal thee, that I may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Sion?”

Voice of Isaias

“ For the wickedness of My people have I struck Him. And He shall give the ungodly for His burial, and the rich for His death; because He hath done no iniquity, neither was there deceit in His mouth.”⁴

Voice of David

“ O praise the Lord, all ye nations; praise Him, all ye people. For His mercy is confirmed upon us; and the truth of the Lord remaineth forever.”⁵

“ The Lord hath been mindful of us, and hath blessed us; He hath blessed all that fear the Lord, both little and great.”⁶

² Lamentations ii, 13.

⁵ Psalms cxvi.

³ Isaias liii, 7.

⁶ Ibid., cxvii; cxiii, 12, 13.

⁴ Ibid., 8, 9.

“This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us be glad and rejoice therein.”⁷

* * * * *

Silence reigned. Deep and profound silence. Magdalen sat at the Virgin's feet, her long hair partly shading her face, her head resting upon her hand. The other women gathered near. There was something momentous in the quiet. No one knew what was passing in the Virgin's mind, but the rapt expression of her face filled them with awe, for they felt they were in the presence of one who looked upon heavenly things.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, our blessed Lord having desired to eat of the Paschal supper with His disciples, was with His chosen ones in the supper room. They were seated at the low Eastern table, reclining on couches, disposed along three of its sides. St. John was at the Saviour's right, and Judas near His left. Then Jesus, as the head of the party, “took the chalice, gave thanks, and said, Take and divide it among you.”⁸

This was the first cup of the Paschal supper. When it had passed round, the next ceremony was the washing of the hands. But our blessed Lord transformed this into the washing of the feet.

And now for this menial office, usually performed

⁷ Psalms cxvii, 24.

⁸ St. Luke xxii, 17.

by slaves, Jesus put aside His garments, poured water into the basin placed as usual at the end of the table, and came first to Peter. But Peter, the impetuous, shrank from allowing his beloved Master to perform so humiliating an action. Finally Peter was prevailed upon to yield, and the Son of God washed, in succession, the feet of all. And when He had resumed His garments, He explained the meaning of this mysterious conduct. He had given them an example of humility, which they must imitate, so as to secure for themselves eternal bliss.

But one of the chosen Twelve would be excluded from the promised reward because of his own actions, and to this Jesus referred when He spoke of the predictions made long centuries before that He would be betrayed.

* * * * *

The moment was at hand.

“He took bread, and blessed and brake, and gave to His disciples, and said, Take ye, and eat. This is My Body.

“Then taking the chalice, He gave thanks and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of this, for this is My Blood.”

Our Lord's Last Supper was over, but on Mary's face seemed to glow a wondrous light. Her uplifted eyes vied with the stars in brilliancy; her beautiful

countenance, her parted lips, her folded arms, her whole body, expressed her worship. And even as the women gazed upon her, a sublime exaltation seized upon them.

“O precious Blood of my Son!” breathed Mary.
 “O adorable Blood of my God!

“I adore Thee! I adore Thee for the entire earth, which as yet does not know the gift Thou hast conferred upon it!

“God, Redeemer of the world, I love Thee! Jesus, strong God, true Light! Author of life! Strength in the combat! Behold me—I am ready to suffer with Thee! All, all . . .”

The Virgin lowered her head. Her eyes rested upon the transported faces of her friends near and dear. A sweet smile played about her lips. Rising, she approached each in turn, and gave them the holy kiss of peace. And strength seemed to enter their limbs; and joy seemed to thrill their hearts; and love, mighty love filled their souls, so that they felt they could endure all with the Mother of the Saviour; comfort her in her sorrows, sustain her in her griefs.

“What aileth thee, O thou Sea, that thou didst flee? And thou, O Jordan, that thou wast turned back? Ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams, and ye hills like lambs of the flock?”⁹

⁹ Psalms cxiii, 5, 6.

It is because the Lord has redeemed His people from servitude, and comes to establish a holy, an eternal covenant. His name is mighty. But His mercy extendeth from generation to generation upon those that fear it.

Let us rejoice!

And yet . . . while the Angels, the Prophets, and all the just of the Old Law exulted over these wonders, and Adam himself felt his repentance turned into joy, the Evil One, full of hatred and revenge, urged Judas on to the consummation of his crime.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BETRAYAL

TOWARD evening, Judas, followed by a body of soldiers from the Temple and the servants of the High Priests, stealthily left the palace of Caiphas and descended the winding streets of the city.

He led the way, crossing the quarter called Arca, and reached the Sterquilinarian gate, which he found open, having previously apprised the gatekeeper of his intentions. There a cohort of Roman soldiers awaited them. They passed in silence through Ophel, where dwelt many friends of Jesus, and made their way along the extensive walls of the old palace of Solomon, soon arriving at the dried-up bed of the torrent Cedron. They crossed it, leaving to the right the tomb of David's rebellious son; they marched quickly into Gethsemani and gained the foot of the mountain.

The moon, which at first had illumined the heavens, suddenly hid itself under dense clouds. The darkness became profound, and the wind moaned sorrowfully in the tops of the trees. It was a gloomy night, seldom seen in this beautiful climate. One of the soldiers carried a resinous torch, and him Judas

called, making him march beside him. Either from agitation, or because of the obscurity, the traitor staggered at every step. The ascent was rough. Several times he stopped to take breath, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Still, the night was cold and the soldiers wrapped their cloaks tightly about them. Once when Judas paused to wipe his streaming brow, the soldier who carried the torch exclaimed:

“If you are so hot, why do you tremble?”

“It is because his heart is the heart of a coward,” remarked one of his companions. Several of these knew that they were come to take Jesus of Nazareth prisoner—and they asked themselves: “In what is this Man really guilty? What has He done?”

Judas made no answer. He continued his ascent, but stopped no more until he reached the summit. They had scaled the mountain on the rockiest side, fearing to meet armed partisans of Christ. Useless precaution! All slept. Sin alone was on the watch around Him that night!

At last they reached the garden where Jesus went daily to pray and converse with His disciples. A voice rang out clearly on the night air. It was the voice of Jesus, and at its sound, Judas gave a violent start. He was speaking to Peter, James, and John. “What?” He asked, mournfully. “Could you not watch one hour with Me?”

There was silence. The darkness was intense. Then, farther off, came the low and thrilling tones:

"O My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me." ¹

So mournful and sad was His voice that it seemed to soften all nature. The rocks themselves, and the echoes lurking among them, responded to it by what seemed almost a moan. And the soul of Judas was troubled, though it was not changed. The demon of his terrible crime clung to him like a vulture; he harassed him, goaded him, intoxicated him with fury, preventing him from turning back.

"He has disdained thee! He has laughed at thee! He has preferred all and every one to thee! Revenge thyself! Revenge thyself!"

The garden had but a single entrance; they followed the windings of the hedge until they came to it.

"If there are several within," said the tribune, the officer of the escort, in a low tone, "how am I to recognize Him whom you call Jesus? Should He choose to escape while I seize on one of His followers, He might do so."

"Do not be afraid," Judas answered, in a thick, guttural tone. "Order the torches lighted and come near me. He whom I salute with a kiss will be the Man you seek."

"You would betray Him with a kiss?" breathed a voice close to his ear, but when he turned to find out who had spoken, no one seemed paying any attention to him. They were nearing the gate of the

¹ St. Matthew xxvi, 39.

garden, which was made of reeds and supported by two high palm-trees, forming a natural arch. Judas opened it—but he staggered, and drove his head against one of the trees. For again that mournful voice was borne to him on the quiet sigh of the night:

“My soul is sorrowful even unto death.”

And again:

“My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”

And again:

“Behold, the hour is at hand!”

At these words Judas shook.

“Rise! Let us go! Behold, he is at hand that will betray Me!”²

A violent imprecation burst from the traitor’s lips. Seizing a torch from the hands of a soldier, he plunged ahead of those who were accompanying Him. Hardly had he taken three steps when a form barred his way, and in the light of the torch upflung in his quivering hand he gazed upon the gentle face of his Lord and Master.

Down Judas, upon your knees, and hope will light its flame once more in your unhappy soul! Down, and beg the pity, the forgiveness of this Saviour, this Redeemer, who loves you!

But the hell in Judas’ bosom flamed into greater fury. That mild and beautiful countenance, shining

² St. Matthew xxvi, 46.

with light, sent a passion of hatred through his wretched heart. Advancing with haggard eyes and foaming mouth, he saluted Jesus.

“Hail, Rabbi!”

And he pressed his lips to the adorable cheek of our God.

“Friend, whereto art thou come?” asked Jesus mildly. And then, in a sterner tone, “Judas, dost thou betray the Son of man with a kiss?”³

The grave words, the reproachful tone, seemed to linger, as if their echo could not die away. And at the sound of them Judas the unfortunate came down headlong from the peaks of hatred to the verge of that yawning chasm of despair which was to prove his last undoing. The crime had been consummated! He had betrayed his Master. The name of Judas—Judas the traitor!—was his for all eternity. And Jesus advanced toward those who had come to arrest Him.

“Whom seek ye?” He said to them.

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am He,” He answered.

At this word they fell in fear, with their faces to the earth. For the glory of His converse with His Father still shrouded Him; the agony of that lonely hour, in which the precious blood had oozed from every pore, still remained. And when He, the Christ, the Son of God, thus proclaimed Himself, the weak

³ St. Luke xxii, 48.

beings before Him yielded Him in fear the homage they refused to yield Him in love or respect.

But Our Saviour looked down with calm dignity upon them. His Passion was at hand. He wished to enter upon it. He was the Man of sorrow, the Victim offered for all mankind. And He said, again:

“Whom seek ye?”

The guards arose, exchanged glances—wondering glances—for their fear had left them as suddenly as it had come.

“Jesus of Nazareth,” one said again—and waited.

“Have I not told you that I am He?” asked Jesus. “If therefore ye seek Me, let these go their way.”⁴

Ashamed of an emotion for which they could not account, they surrounded Him, shoving Him among them, so that there might be no opportunity for rescue or escape. As they turned to leave the garden, the disciples, overcome with anger and sorrow at seeing their Master thus maltreated, would have opposed them, and Peter, drawing his sword, with a sudden blow severed from his head the ear of Malchus, one of the High Priest’s servants.

The Saviour looked at Peter reprovingly.

“Put up again thy sword in its place,” He said, “for all that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I can not ask My Father, and He will give Me presently more than twelve legions of angels?”⁵

⁴ St. John xviii, 8.

⁵ St. Matthew xxvi, 52, 53.

Ashamed and ill-at-ease, Peter withdrew a little, and Our Lord, coming forward, touched the wound in Malchus' head and healed it. The astonished man stood lost in the crowd, irritated still by the blow he had received, but of which there was no evidence now save memory.

“Who can He be, this Nazarene, whose touch heals the wounded flesh?”

After this act of violence, the tribune at the head of the cohort ordered the hands of Jesus to be bound and the torches made ready for the march. And he gave the word of command to go to the house of Annas, the father-in-law of the High Priest, Caiphas. Hearing this, and beholding the Saviour treated with such rudeness, fear seized upon the hearts of the disciples. They fled in a panic, as raw soldiers might flee who see their leader captured before their very eyes.

The disciples were then but weak and pusillanimous men, incapable of resisting the great and powerful of this earth. The very name of Annas made them tremble. Yet these men were later to become, by the power of the Holy Ghost, the unconquerable heroes of the new faith.

Judas remained. His eyes followed the flaming lights through the trees until their last glimmer was lost. He was alone in impenetrable darkness. Like a man who, in a moment of frenzy has been about to throw himself into an abyss, and is restored to reason just at the moment of his fall, so Judas now

found himself the prey of other thoughts than those of hatred and jealousy. He was in the bottomless gulf, indeed, but he was not alone. The angel of darkness was there, and laid burning fingers on his heart.

“Rejoice, rejoice! Thou hast done what no other being has wished to do! Since the birth of this Man I have vainly sought for one to betray Him. All have refused. Only thou, Judas!”

Judas caught his head in his hands as if to still the tumult in his brain.

“To some I have offered all the wealth of the earth! To others, the dominion of this world! To others, pleasures that would intoxicate my angels. Some have been tempted—but one look alone from His eyes has disarmed them. All—yes, all, have refused this great mission of hell! Only thou, Judas!”

Moans of mortal terror fell from the lips of the unhappy wretch.

“Of thine own will thou hast undertaken this thing! Without effort, without fear! For thirty—pieces—of—silver! Thirty—pieces—of—silver! All the powers of hell are in thy debt. In debt to thee, Judas, only thee!”

The moan of terror rose to a loud shriek as these thoughts burned their way into his soul.

“But, say, Judas, what harm has He done thee? What harm has He done thee? Come, tell me, Judas.”

Oh, most unfortunate of men, thine hour of grace is not yet past. Seek the feet of that Jesus who is

being led away from thee! Force thy way through the soldiers and let His eyes rest upon thee! Divine eyes, that will cure thy wound and assuage thy treachery! Stumbling like one gone blind, muttering and moaning, his teeth chattering, Judas fled. He encountered no one—he was alone with his crime, alone with his despair. But Satan whispered mockingly:

“And hell is thy portion, forever, forever, forever! Hell is thy portion forever!”

Later, a miserable being with staring eyes and haggard countenance re-entered the city of Jerusalem. It was Judas. Here he learned the issue of his Master's trial, and going to the Temple, threw the silver they had given him at the feet of the Priests assembled in the council hall. Then he went out.

Afterwards it was said that he must have wandered during the night in the valley of Josaphat, and round the tombs of the Prophets. When the day dawned he was found dead under the broken branches of a sycamore that grew at the foot of the Mount of Scandal. A cord, attached to his neck, and to the broken branch, indicated clearly what kind of a death he had chosen.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BEFORE THE HIGH PRIEST

SURROUNDED by the soldiers, the servants of the High Priest, and the others who had followed in their train, the Saviour descended the mountain. He was alone among His enemies, and they—now that they had regained their audacity—laughed at themselves for the emotion they had experienced in the presence of this Man. His disciples had fled at the first moment of danger, like a flock before the destroying wolf, leaving Him to the mercy of His foes.

The night was gloomy and clouded; the stars were dimmed, even as human eyes are dimmed with tears. No sound was heard save that of the wind as it moaned through the tops of the trees, and that of the heavy steps, the blasphemies, or the coarse remarks of the rough men. No voice was raised save that of the sentinel, who, fearing surprise, challenged them sharply. Jesus experienced a great and bitter oppression of spirit, and His soul was overwhelmed at the sight of man's ingratitude, the cowardice of those He loved.

But, on approaching the Sterquilinarian gate, He perceived three women hidden in the shade of the wicket. At once He understood that Mary, His Mother, had followed thus to comfort Him.

“Oh, my Son, I suffer with Thee! My soul is indissolubly united to all Thy sorrows!”

This maternal sympathy was most precious to Him at this moment of utter dereliction. Tears of tenderness rose to His sacred eyes. Some of the peaceful hours of His infancy flashed across His mind. His Mother’s caressing arms had been His cradle, her breast His pillow. The Son of Mary, the Man of sorrow, paid, in love, the love of His Mother.

The escort stopped to exchange the password, and the women approached noiselessly. Two of them knelt before Jesus, and kissed the hem of His robe. The third clasped Him in her arms for one moment—only one moment. And though this joy was bitter, there was sweetness in it for the Son and Mother separated so long.

All this passed with the rapidity of lightning. The gate was opened. The soldiers pushed Jesus forward, separating the Virgin from her Son. Yet, thanks to the obscurity, the women were able to mix with the escort, and re-enter Jerusalem in the train of the Saviour. The torches had been extinguished before filing into the streets of the city, save that carried at the head of the procession. They marched now in complete silence, without

speaking a word. Presently the women felt that a stranger was close to them, and a few muttered words betrayed his identity.

It was Simon Peter.

Ashamed at his cowardly desertion, he had turned back, determined to follow his Master, and to die with Him. His spirit was full of boldness—he contemplated a thousand rash projects—yet the smallest movement of the soldiers made him tremble. This was his nature—an enterprising spirit, united to a timid heart. There are many such in the world. In realizing that they exist, or that such is our own nature, God wishes us to understand our moral infirmities, in order to render us humble and forbearing.

Having perceived Mary Magdalen and Salome, Simon Peter joined them. The troop led the way to the house of Annas the Sacrificer, which was situated on the brow of the hill, near the gate of Sion. Close to its threshold grew a large olive-tree, and they bound Our Lord to this, while a guard watched Him. Then the tribune entered for further orders. The torches shone upon that sacred figure, and the holy women could contemplate His divine beauty. He had clothed Himself that morning in His festive garments, that He might celebrate the Passover, and He wore a seamless robe of the color of the hyacinth which the Virgin had spun and dyed and embroidered with her own loving hands.

For what a festival had she prepared it!

Intense sorrow, painful tenderness, filled the heart of the Mother, looking in silence on the face of her Son. She could not remove her gaze. . . . Then the tribune came forth from the house of Annas, and ordering the prisoner to be untied, they resumed the march to where Caiphas the High Priest waited—and where the Priests, Scribes, and Ancients had been assembled for some hours.

The palace was some distance away, and as the procession formed again, the Virgin and her companions followed at a distance. Once reached, the tribune knocked with the pommel of his sword. A wicket, hidden under the portico, was opened, and shut upon the troop. The Virgin and her friends were left outside in the darkness. Jesus, too, had disappeared with the soldiers.

“What will happen?” murmured Peter, after a few moments of oppressive silence. “They have seized Him at night, contrary to all our customs, and without any legal authority. All laws are violated! Yet what crime has He committed? Of what can they accuse Him?”

The Virgin said no word. She knew that hell was unchained; that it was employing the passions, each in its turn, of those who governed the city, to accomplish the death of the Just One. She understood that God was permitting all these things, in order that the expiation might be accomplished, the Sacrifice completed. And this knowledge sealed her lips, while it almost broke her heart.

As for Magdalen, the other Mary, and Salome, they wept, but hope had not died within them. The mystery had not been revealed; their faith in the power of the Saviour to turn all trials to a glorious triumph had not waned.

The door was shut upon Jesus, true, but now they supplicated Peter to penetrate into the house of Caiphaz, in order to learn what was happening to their divine Master. Peter recalled to mind that he was acquainted with Obed, one of the servants of the High Priest, and placing Mary and the other women under a projecting porch opposite the palace, the depth of which would hide them from view, he left them in order to gain entrance.

Knocking gently at the door, which was opened to him at once, he inquired for Obed, and Obed, greeting him, motioned him to enter. This much the holy women saw—then the door was closed again and silence took possession of the place.

Secretly, Obed was a friend of Peter and a follower of Jesus. Now, sharing the Apostle's anxiety, he led him as far as the entrance of the tribunal itself and left him there with many cautions regarding silence and discretion.

The tribunal was on the ground floor, on one of the sides of the interior court. The hall was hung with purple, and appeared magnificent. It was lighted by torches set in chandeliers of massive silver. Here Caiphaz was seated on an elevated throne, surrounded by the Ancients and the members of the

council, and he had ordered Jesus, whose hands were still bound, to be brought before him.

Then began the most unjust trial the world has ever seen. Imagine, if one can, the furious and iniquitous joy which animated the whole council. They asked questions, but waited for no answers. Jesus replied to nothing—neither jibe nor taunt nor insult.

False witnesses, prepared beforehand, were heard. Peter listened, with indignant astonishment, to their lying depositions.

“And they found not—whereas many false witnesses had come in. And last of all there came two . . .

“And they said: This Man said I am able to destroy the temple of God, and after three days to rebuild it.”¹

A triumphant joy played over the countenances of the judges. Caiphas smiled, and smote his hands upon his knees. Then rising, he said:

“Answerest Thou nothing to these things which these witness against Thee?”

But Jesus held His peace. He heard all with serene and unruffled dignity. The insults heaped upon Him left Him unmoved. The mockery flung at Him He met with majestic serenity. And this serenity at last had its effect. His very silence was casting scorn upon them.

¹ St. Matthew xxvi, 60, 61.

And the High Priest said:

"I adjure Thee, BY THE LIVING GOD, that Thou tell us if Thou be the Christ, the Son of God?"

Silence once more—a silence that filled every nook of that impious court. And then in a firm, sweet, loud voice, Our Lord replied:

"Thou hast said it."

The words penetrated all hearts.

"Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of the power of God, and coming in the clouds of heaven."²

Caiphas lifted his arms, and catching his robe at the throat, rent it, while his hands quivered with the passion that consumed him. His impious fury had sought but that pretext.

"He hath blasphemed! What further need have we of witnesses? Now you have heard His blasphemy—what think you?"

"He is guilty of death, He is guilty of death!" they shouted. And then ensued a scene such as had never before been witnessed in a court of inquiry or justice. Mad with fury, wild with rage and hatred, they spat upon His face. They struck Him with their open palms; with clenched fists they smote Him, each one striving to expend his frantic anger in a blow. And then, mocking and sneering, they cried:

"Prophecy unto us, O Christ, who he is that struck Thee!"

² St. Matthew xxvi, 63, 64.

Then the soldiers led Jesus into the court where the servants and officers of the High Priest were warming themselves around a large fire. Caiphas had set them the example—they improved upon it. Outrages, injuries, scorn, violence, gross insults, fell, like the rain of the infernal regions, upon this Man, the Just among the unjust, the divine Redeemer of mankind.

O thrice-holy patience! How could a God endure and not annihilate these infernal wretches!

And Peter was there, hidden, Peter, who had declared, "Lord, I am ready to go with Thee both into prison and to death!"³ But here was prison and here was death, and Peter shrank in mortal fear from both. All courage had deserted him. He trembled and his face was ashen. He would have fled, but dared not until a favorable opportunity presented itself. He had forgotten everything. He had forgotten those words of his Master: "I say to thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day until thou thrice deniest that thou knowest Me!"⁴

He was paralyzed with terror.

And at this moment a Galilean servant, passing by, observed him. From the peculiar shape of his robe she knew that he was from her native mountains.

"Thou art with Jesus of Nazareth?" she asked. "Perhaps thou art even one of His disciples?" Her voice testified the intensity of her pity. The suf-

³ St. Luke xxii, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

ferings which had been inflicted on the poor Prisoner had wounded her heart. But Peter, looking about him stealthily, fearing that these words would betray him to the cruel soldiery, exclaimed:

“I know not what thou sayest!”

He left her then. His fear gave him courage. He must make his escape. But even as he neared the door, another servant, the companion of the one who had already spoken, fixed her large dark eyes upon him.

“I have most assuredly seen thee among the disciples of Jesus,” she said. “And not long since. It was the day on which we threw flowers beneath His feet. Why, I cast in His path the wedding-crown which Obed, whom thou knowest well, I am sure, had given me! How grand was that day. Who could have foreseen this?”

And the young girl turned to wipe the tears from her cheek.

“I do not know the Man,” said Peter, desperately.

“Feasting and tears are bosom friends,” said one standing close by, in rude accents.

“Do you not understand that some foolish people can not abide prosperity?” exclaimed another. More remarks followed, and presently, to Peter’s great alarm, he saw that attention was concentrating round him. The executioners themselves began to look on with interest. One of them, still brandishing the short and cruel whip with which he had beaten the Prisoner, approached.

“Thou canst not make *me* believe that thou art not one of the disciples of Jesus,” he said, mockingly. “Thy speech betrayeth thee for a Galilian.”

And he endeavored to imitate the thick and guttural accents which proclaimed the town of Peter’s birth. The boisterous laughter of his companions greeted this sally. And Peter, quivering with fear, began to curse and swear in loud tones that he knew not Jesus of Nazareth.

At this very moment, a cock, roosting on the capital of one of the pillars, frightened by the noise and the brightness, began to crow and flap his wings loudly.

“And Peter remembered the words of Jesus.”⁵

At that cry, thrice repeated, he recovered from the passion of fear into which the events of this night had plunged him. Executioners, whips, cords, all faded. He was conscious only of his weakness, and of his Master’s face—his Master, his beloved and loving Master, whom he had just denied! At this moment Jesus mildly turned His head and looked at the Apostle. That kind glance was full of pity and sweetness. A fearful sob burst from Peter’s breast. He loved Him, his Master, so dearly! And this, this was how he had shown his love! With tears streaming down his cheeks, he rushed out into the night.

Mary was where he had left her; he fell on his knees at her feet. His bosom heaved with sighs which he could not repress. The Virgin, Mother of

⁵ St. Matthew xxvi, 75.

sorrows, let her sad eyes rest upon the prostrate figure.

“Ah, Peter—why wilt thou not be at peace since He has pardoned thee?”

But such comfort was not for Peter yet. He buried his face in his cloak and wept. Magdalen and Salome dared not imagine what had happened. They only remembered that the Virgin knew all.

Her soul was pierced with so keen a sword of sorrow that she looked up to heaven, hoping thence to draw strength to bear the frightful hours that now stretched before her. She suffered with her Son, as only she could suffer, and prayed for the world, which God judged worthy of the immense sacrifice about to be offered.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE CONDEMNATION

IN the morning all the chief Priests and Ancients of the people again assembled. Although they had judged Jesus worthy of death they could not arrogate to themselves the authority of pronouncing the sentence. For this the ratification of Pilate was necessary—since without the approval of the Roman Procurator who governed them, they had no power to carry out an edict of death.

This approval they hoped to wrest from the weak Pilate, and in consequence they hurriedly led Our Lord to the fortress Antonia, where the Roman official resided.

The Blessed Mother was still concealed from view in the place where she had watched and prayed during the whole of this terrible night. She saw her dear Jesus come forth, surrounded by those who were conducting Him to the Procurator. Soldiers and servants crowded after Him and formed a mock cortège.

“Oh, how changed, how changed He is!” whispered Magdalen, in an accent of deepest woe.

“Truly this is the Man of sorrows,” said the other Mary, in as low a tone.

And so indeed He appeared, His adorable features covered with bruises, His garments rent and soiled with mud. The Virgin raised her veil, so that her loving glance might clothe Him, as it were, might linger upon Him, might prove, if proof were ever necessary, that she suffered with Him! Mothers will know what sentiments filled the heart of the Mother of God at this moment.

Her companions noted that she, too, had changed. Ah, yes! In spirit she had participated in His sufferings. She beheld that chaste body, fashioned by the Holy Ghost, bleeding with wounds—there, under her very eyes, besmeared with mud and clay; and God Himself the jest and byword of all the vile rabble!

What a price was paid for your soul and for mine!

And now Magdalen, looking upon Him who had shone with divine splendor before her, at last realized that danger of death was threatening.

“Where are those who yesterday kissed the print of His feet? Where those who followed Him with cries of joy and transport of love? All have vanished! Vanished!” She clasped her hands in agony. “Cowards! They have abandoned Him to a few madmen thirsting for blood and drunk with wine, whom a little boldness would scatter to their holes! Shall we allow Him to perish? Oh, no, no!”

For she saw the weakness of the guard. His

friends were many. A determined attack, and He might be rescued and carried to safety. With mouth firmly set, and despairing eyes, she whispered to the Virgin that she must go and see what might be done. Hurriedly drawing her veil about her, she turned swiftly toward the more secluded streets of the city, where many lived who had followed in the train of our blessed Lord, and who had received favors from Him. They had been friends and partisans of the Saviour, and to them she addressed herself.

"Come!" she cried. "He whom you love is about to perish; arm yourselves. Come, and defend Him! He will be put to death if you do not hasten! Come, come!"

She called each by his name. She called the lepers that had been healed, the sick that had been cured, the guilty who had been pardoned, the blind restored to sight, the deaf restored to sound, the lame made whole!

But those who heard her did not respond. They withdrew into their homes. She beat at the door of that house in which dwelt Joseph of Arimathea, but he was already forth in the streets—whither she could not discover. She went to the disciples, but they anticipated all manner of evil, and would not show themselves. These men, one day to be the intrepid supporters of the Church, yes, martyrs of the new Faith, were now too timid even to appear.

Passing through one of the narrow streets she remembered that a paralytic who had been cured only

three days before now lived within it. She ran to him, just opening the door of his house, that the sweetness of the morning might enter.

“Come and help Him who healed thee! He is being dragged through the streets like a criminal. The Priests would put Him to death. Come! You have many of the goods of this world! Use them now for His sake!”

But the Pharisees had already spoken with this man, and he coldly turned away from her appeal.

“I know that He cured me. But they say that He is wicked, the servant of Beelzebub. What can I do to help Him? If He is condemned justly, He must suffer.”

“Oh, vile one!” said Magdalen. “Is it thus you repay His goodness? Thus?”

And tears rose to her eyes. Never, in all her life, had she thought hearts could be so hard. She was turning back in despair, when the name of Servilius suggested itself to her. He was rich and powerful, and could command the services of many friends. Alas! Magdalen the penitent could now but plead where Magdalen the sinner had only to wish to be obeyed! Servilius told her frankly that he would do nothing. He had just been named Procurator of the Gauls, and he did not propose to endanger his rising honors by any such futile attempt.

Magdalen left him abruptly. Time was flying. If Jesus was not rescued ere He reached the palace

of Pilate, all would be lost. The guards would be increased. And now she understood how hopeless had been her quest, how useless her seeking of help.

Sobs broke from her. She pulled her veil across her face that none might observe her grief. As she went she could not control herself. Presently she knew that others had joined her—three of the disciples, James, Philip, and John. A sorrowful band, indeed! At the corner of the street a youth and maiden were passing. The face of the girl was stained with tears. As she approached with the three disciples, the young man addressed her.

“Can you tell me whither they have taken Jesus?” he asked.

“To the fortress Antonia,” said Magdalen.

“Let us follow,” said the young girl, nervously.

“Let us die with Him if we can not save Him!”

“Poor children!” said Magdalen, in a broken tone.

“All those who might have saved Him have abandoned Him. He is alone, in the hands of a furious mob. But we will join Him, and when He stands before Pilate, we will cry out for mercy and justice. Perhaps our voices may be heard.”

Jezeel and Melkam—faithful ones!—joined her, and soon a few other women—Melkam’s mother and some of their relatives—followed. They hastened on, and finally located the cortège by the clamor which accompanied it. In traversing the lower part of the city the escort had been augmented by the

meanest of the populace, who pushed and rolled like the waves of a roaring torrent.

Magdalen and the disciples looked at one another in sorrow. They felt their weakness. The only thing they could do was to reach the Virgin Mother's side, and keep a passage for her near her Son. It took them some moments to shove their way through the jostling crowd, but at last they did so.

The Mother of the Redeemer followed Him hopelessly.

"O God," she was crying out, in her pure heart, "must this dreadful sacrifice really be accomplished? Is not this enough? Are not these dread insults sufficient? Hear me, Father in heaven! Let humanity redeem humanity. I will search this earth for hearts pure enough to expiate the faults of their fathers. Young maidens, wise matrons. I will gather them together, and we shall go to the mountain and there pray to Thee day and night. But now save my dear Son, Thine only Son, in whom Thou art well-pleased."

But then she seemed to see Sin spread upon this earth through all the ages. She saw Sin soiling the creature. She heard a voice rising mournfully from the whole world. She understood that only the blood of a God could wash away so many iniquities.

The cortège arrived at the foot of the marble steps that led to the house of Pilate. The Doctors of the Law and the members of the Council ascended them. They could not enter this heathen domicile lest they

should incur a legal defilement which would prevent them from eating the Pasch, as they were expected to do that very day.

Pilate, therefore, came out to give them audience. He seated himself on the top of the steps, with his guards and servants. Two steps below him stood the Pharisees and the Doctors. The crowd remained at the bottom of the stairs, and Jesus, with His hands still bound, and surrounded by His executioners, was at a little distance between the crowd and His accusers. His Mother and the friends—men and women—who accompanied her, were ranged behind a statue of the Emperor, which concealed them from observation, and whence they could see everything.

“Well,” began Pilate, austere, “what is the accusation against this Prisoner?”

There was silence. Then one said:

“We have found this Man perverting the people. We have judged Him guilty of death. We wish you to confirm our sentence.”

Stumblingly they uttered these words. Their tongues had become mute. They had forgotten what they wished to say, and moved about uneasily.

“That is no cause—” began Pilate.

“He forbids giving tribute to Cæsar, saying that He is Christ the King,”¹ cried a loud voice.

Pilate descended a few steps.

¹ St. Luke xxiii, 2.

“Art Thou the King of the Jews?” he asked Jesus.

“Thou sayest it,” answered our blessed Lord.

Pilate looked at Him intently—at that bound form, that mud-caked garment, that bruised face, that brow, those eyes. . . . A feeling of unrest stirred in his bosom. He returned to his seat.

“I find no cause in this Man,” he said.²

His accusers had by this time collected their senses. One of them began a long and skilful discourse, in which he cited all the crimes that had been imputed to Jesus, as also the depositions of the false witness.

“This Man,” he ended, theatrically, “who appears before you now in so humble a guise, is a disturber of the public peace. He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place.³ Yes, from Galilee even to Jerusalem have the crowds followed, crying out Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed be the King who cometh in the name of the Lord!”⁴

“Is he a Galilean?” asked Pilate, eagerly.

“He is of Galilee!” they answered.

“Conduct Him, then, to Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, who is now at Jerusalem. It is the right of Herod to judge Him.”

A murmur of disgust arose from the crowd, and the Pharisees and Doctors muttered angrily. Pilate, however, having given his sentence, arose and went into his palace. Weak and of little discernment, he

² St. Luke xxiii, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, xxiii, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xix, 38.

grasped at this means of delivering himself from a most difficult affair—and he seized the opportunity of making Herod his friend by thus deferring to his judgment.

The cortège resumed its march. Some of those who loved Him began to hope, seeing Jesus sent to Herod. Magdalen whispered: "It is said that Herod is much less severe than Pilate." But Mary made no comment. Jesus was accused of sedition. That was enough to convict Him.

The coming of the Saviour pleased Herod. For a long time he had been curious in His regard, because of the prodigies that were related of Him. He even hoped that this Man, in order to save Himself, might work a miracle in his presence. He questioned Him in many ways. Our Lord said nothing. The chief Priests and the Scribes stood by, earnestly accusing Him. But still the Saviour uttered no word. Jesus, so patient toward the sinner, so merciful to the woman of Samaria and the woman accused of adultery, so mild and clement even toward Judas who betrayed Him, had no word for this great one of the earth.

For He saw in him a heart devoid of all feeling; a soul dead under the weight of the world's riches; an intellect stifled by sensual pleasures, and the wretchedness of a selfish life.

He did not answer Herod, and Herod, angered at His silence, mocked Him. And Herod's soldiers

mocked Him. And when they were tired of the sorry sport, Herod dismissed them, saying:

“Put upon Him the white robe of royalty and send Him back to Pilate, that he who is the governor of all Judea may pass what sentence he will upon Him.”

For which exchange of courtesies Holy Writ tells us: “Herod and Pilate were made friends that same day; for before they were enemies one to another.”⁵

What a price was paid for your soul and for mine!

It was clear now that since Herod had not acquitted Him, Jesus was lost. And the Mother followed as she would follow unto the end. She faced the woe; she took the cup of sorrow to her lips and drained it to the dregs.

The troops set out again for the house of Pilate. When one of his servants brought him the most unwelcome news that the multitude had come back again with the Prisoner, he was much disturbed.

For Jesus was accused of treachery, and Pilate was ambitious. He paid court to the Roman senate. Nevertheless, when he came forth for the second time to receive the High Priests, the senators, and the people who would not enter the prætorium, he was more firmly convinced than ever of the innocence of Jesus.

“You have brought this Man before me, charging

⁵ St. Luke xxiii, 12.

Him with attempt to excite the people to revolt. And yet, having examined Him in your presence, I find nothing guilty in Him, nor Herod more than I. I will chastise Him, therefore, and release Him.”⁶

Magdalen and Jezel trembled. “But if He is not guilty, why punish Him?” cried the young girl, with the fiery judgment of youth.

The people remained silent.

“It is customary, at the Paschal festival, to release any prisoner for whom you, the people, have a special desire. Take your choice, therefore, Who shall be released to you—Jesus, the Prophet, or Barabbas, the murderer? You may have either one or the other.”

He waited complacently for the word that would release Jesus and relieve him of further responsibility. But Claudia Procula, leaning forth from one of the golden-latticed windows to discover the cause of the great commotion, saw Jesus upon the steps. Almost overcome, she called a servant to her quickly.

“Go, go to my lord,” she said, “and tell him that during the night I have been greatly disturbed in my dreams because of the just Man who now stands before him. Tell him he must let Him go free—and not inflict the slightest punishment upon Him!”

This message was carried to Pilate, and added to his indecision and restlessness. He had suggested a

⁶ St. Luke xxiii, 16.

most unfortunate compromise. The priests would not be satisfied with anything but the death of Jesus. The people, reminded of their right to choose, rejected the limitation of their choice. True to their leaders, then, and to the passions incited by them, they began to clamor loudly for the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus.

Pilate sat in dumb astonishment as the cry arose around him.

“What shall I do, then, with Jesus, that is called Christ?”

“Let Him be crucified!”

“Why, what evil hath He done?”

But the tumult arose once more.

“Let Him be crucified!”⁷

Louder and louder surged that dreadful cry: “Let Him be crucified! Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

The Roman governor wished to resist them still, for his wife, not trusting to the servant, had followed, and concealing herself under a purple hanging, sent him another imploring message.

“Protect this Man! Save Him from death, or shudder at the consequences.”

The Procurator pondered a little, weighing the life of Jesus against the favor of the Romans, his own weak will and the clamor of the crowd. He yielded at last to the fear of endangering his interests. “And their voices prevailed.”⁸

⁷ St. Matthew xxvii, 22, 23.

⁸ St. Luke xxiii, 23.

Casting fear aside, he ordered Jesus to be scourged, as the usual preliminary to crucifixion. Stripping Our Lord to the waist, the soldiers bound Him to a low pillar, that bending He might be in a better position to receive the lashes of the instrument of torture—a leather thong, loaded at its tips with lead or iron.

The scourging began. The Mother of sorrows heard the blows that descended upon the flesh of her Son and her God.

You, who have suffered through the pain of one you dearly loved . . . oh, was your grief like hers? What are torments or sufferings ever endured compared to hers when she beheld that cherished body mangled in such a manner by the hands of men?

And that Son of man, the fruit of her womb, is divine; that flesh, whipped and torn, is divine! That silent Victim is the Son of God, God of God and Light of Light!

But . . . at this very moment . . . when the Man God is overwhelmed with most frightful physical agony, He looks upon a horrible vision. He sees all who will withdraw themselves from His Redemption, the schisms, the divisions, the incredulity of future ages. Irreligious luxury. Pride that would call itself Philosophy. His soul is burdened with every sin, every crime, every evil which ignorance and blindness commit. The iniquities of

earth's creatures tear at His soul as the lashes tear at His body.

But now the scourging was over, and the Roman soldiers, who have no pity for this Victim, who belonged to the hated Jewish race, would carry their sport still further. They clothed Him, therefore, with a purple cloak, and they put a crown of thorns upon His head, and they placed a reed as scepter in His bruised hands.

And then began an hour of cruel jest and ribald play. They mocked Him. They prostrated themselves upon the ground before Him. They struck Him and asked Him to prophesy whose hand inflicted the blow. They laughed and jested and paid court of cruelty to Jesus, the King of the Jews.

When Pilate beheld Jesus in this frightful condition, he was moved with compassion. He could not understand why the people could want Him punished further. He himself, therefore, led Him forward and presented Him.

"Behold the Man!" he exclaimed. "I bring Him forth unto you that you may know that I find no cause in Him!"⁹

Behold the Man more bruised by the sins which He has taken upon Himself than by the scourging, more wounded by the crimes of men than by the tearing of His flesh. In the presence of such suffering, such meekness, the people were silent. Then

⁹ St. John xix, 4.

the voices of the chief Priests and their servants sounded clamorously.

“Crucify Him!” they screamed. “Crucify Him!”

Pilate was incensed at this implacable hatred.

“Take Him you, and crucify Him; for I find no cause in Him,” he exclaimed, resolved that he would not put Jesus to death. But the crafty Jewish leaders rose up once more.

“We have a law,” they cried, “and according to the Law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God!”

Again Pilate wavered between fear and sympathy. He went back to the hall.

“Whence art thou?” he demanded in desperation.

Jesus did not answer.

“Speakest Thou not to me? Knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee, and I have power to release Thee?”

That thorn-crowned head was raised wearily. Those worn eyes gazed out at him from that blood-stained face.

“Thou shouldst not have any power against Me unless it were given thee from above,” said Jesus. “Therefore he that hath delivered Me to thee hath the greater sin.”

“I—I can not! I will not condemn this Man to death!” said Pilate. “I—”

“If thou release this Man thou art not Cæsar’s friend!” said the Priests with a sneer. “For whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Cæsar!”

The Roman Procurator was no match for his wily opponents. They threatened him with the thing he feared the most on earth—the displeasure of the Emperor. This decided his course of action. He felt himself compelled to give the final sentence. But first he offered a sop to his own accusing conscience. In the midst of the tumult that now ensued he ordered his servants to bring him water. Standing there, in the sight of the assembled multitude, he washed his hands. This singular action quieted the noise for a moment. The silence that followed allowed the voice of the Roman to be heard most plainly as he disowned all share in this horrible crime.

“I am innocent of the blood of this just Man!” he exclaimed. “Look ye to it.”

A yell answered him—and the voice of every demon in every lane and alley and byway of hell joined to make that shout as loud as loudest thunderclap:

“His blood be upon us; and upon our children!”

At this frightful cry, the Virgin moaned, and buried her head in her hands. Magdalen and the others were terror-stricken—they expected the heavens to open and annihilate these unfortunate wretches. Pilate’s face whitened. Inside the grated window Claudia, his wife, heaved a great sigh and fell unconscious to the ground. Yet with that same hand which he had just washed and purified, he signed the sentence of Jesus’ condemnation. Our Saviour was led forth once more.

"Behold your King!"

"Away with Him! Crucify Him!"

"Shall I crucify your King?"

"We have no king but Cæsar!"

The condemnation was given.

"Conduct to the place of punishment Jesus of Nazareth, who incites the people to revolt, despises Cæsar, and calls Himself falsely the Messiah. Go, lictor, prepare the cross."

Hearing this, Magdalen trembled, and sank almost unconscious to the ground. Salome and the other women supported her. Only Mary remained—Mary, the Mother of the Man condemned. She saw nothing but her Son. Her soul was in her eyes, and across the sea of hatred and passion that surged between them their pure gaze met. She could almost read His thoughts. "The work advances," He was saying to her in His heart, and her heart heard.

In the meantime an echo repeated in the air:

"Prepare the cross!" A second repeated it; a third which seemed to come from the heavens above re-echoed the phrase:

"Prepare the cross, whence is to issue salvation to the world."

But the frantic, maddened, devil-driven multitude heard nothing. Neither the voices of heaven nor those of earth; nor the smothered wailings of Mary Magdalen, nor the pitiful sobs and cries for pardon and justice from those who accompanied her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE CRUCIFIXION

THE greatest criminals in the world are not condemned unheard. They have a defendant. Their case is prepared. Witnesses are examined for or against, and the merits of both sides strictly scrutinized.

For Jesus there were no laws. All were forgotten, all were set aside. The judge who condemned Him declared Him innocent, but notwithstanding His innocence, He was delivered to His executioners.

His executioners! A lawless mob of ferocious animals, incited to the cruelest deeds by the devils unloosed from the pits of hell. These were the ones who surrounded Him—a God who wished to die for them—a God whose blood would fall upon them.

They dragged Him through the streets of the city, weighted down by His heavy cross. Clothed again in His own garments, led by the Roman centurion Longinus, and with four soldiers as a guard, followed by the two thieves, also guarded, who were to die with Him, He advanced along the Dolorous Way. The laughter and mockery of the crowd were His

funeral dirge. The wood of the cross pressed into His wounded and bleeding shoulder.

He staggered and fell, exhausted.

Was He to perish under the very gaze of His executioners? His eyes closed. Every human help had failed. The angels had fled. The Father in heaven turned away His face from the sight of that lonely Man laden with the frightful sins of the world.

O sublime Mother, draw near! At this moment of overpowering anguish, thy loving hand alone dare touch this torn and bruised body. . . . With the majesty of grief she pushed aside those who would keep her from her Son. Her face unveiled bears the mark of such anguish that all fall back before it.

She approached her Beloved and knelt near Him, wiping the sweat and blood from His countenance. She felt indeed as if death was creeping through her every vein. But she came to afford assistance, not to seek it, and she tried to support her Son in her weak arms. Moved to pity by this sight, one of the soldiers lifted the cross, to allow the poor Victim a moment's repose.

Mary spoke a few low words. Jesus turned His eyes upon her. No human speech can interpret what passed between those two. But just then, Longinus caught sight of a stranger, who, from the

fashion of his garments, seemingly hailed from the country. He had stopped to gaze at the unwonted spectacle before him, and the centurion seized his opportunity.

“Come, thou, and help here. We would not have the Man die ere we reach the place of execution,” he exclaimed, roughly.

Simon of Cyrene approached as bidden. Jesus tottered to His feet once more, and the holy women who had followed came nearer, weeping bitterly and lamenting.

“Daughters of Jerusalem,” He said, faintly, “weep not over Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”¹

The Saviour resumed His mournful journey—followed by His Mother and her friends. Love caused her such anguish that she well-nigh died at every step. But Love again gave her such strength that the very fear of abandoning Him before the end helped her to surmount her weakness.

“My Son, my Son!” whispered the heartbroken Mother. “Every step of Thine doth save a world.”

At this moment the Mother of Christ was worthy of the God who had chosen her. She too so loved the world as to give her only-begotten Son. And yet Mary was weak and a woman; those who looked upon her could scarcely recognize her countenance.

¹ St. Luke xxiii, 28.

She would follow her Son to the end. She had been His pure and ardent worshiper at the first moment of His existence. She would be His pure and ardent worshiper at the last breath of His life.

* * * * *

The cortège had passed the city, and going out by the Gate of the Judges ascended the rough and difficult way to Golgotha. When they approached the Mount of Crucifixion the beloved disciple placed his hand on Mary's arm.

"Go no further!" he said, hoarsely. "The horror which is to follow is not to be witnessed by thee, His Mother. Thou canst not behold it and live."

He would have led her aside. She did not move, but looked at him with eyes which held within their depths the sorrows of the world.

"John," she said, "near or far, His sufferings can not escape me."

John knew it. He drew her away, nevertheless, striving to conceal from her view, if possible, the terrible ending to this most terrible of journeys. While the cross was placed on the ground, our dear Saviour was stripped of His garments, and, with only a linen cloth about His loins, was lifted to the little projection midway upon the upright post. His arms were tied with ropes amid the boisterous cries of the multitude, which resembled the roaring of the ocean on a tempestuous day. Then, quite suddenly, silence intervened, punctuated by dull, regular, heavy

sounds. The Virgin fell upon her knees. Her bosom heaved. John and the holy women followed her example, covering their faces, while low moans fell from their lips. With indescribable horror they heard the blows of the hammers in the hands of those who were crucifying their Lord. The crucifixion of the two thieves followed, and their screams of agony seemed doubly horrible after the silence of Christ.

One thing remained to complete this dreadful deed—the nailing above His sacred head of that title which Pilate had written in Latin, Greek and Aramaic:

THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

And even though the Jewish leaders—in the eyes of the Jews one dying on the cross was accursed of God—protested against the designation, it was in vain.

Gathering her strength, the Mother rose to her feet and advanced firmly to where her Son was enduring such cruel agony. She reached the very foot of the cross, followed by those who loved her. She touched it with her trembling hand, and then stood by the cross, the Mother of sorrows.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” said Christ, the Son of God.

The people nearby gazed upon this scene, unfeelingly. The rulers derided Him.

“He saved others. Let Him save Himself, if He be Christ, the elect of God.”

“True, true!” exclaimed those who overheard. “There is truth in that!”

“If Thou be the King of the Jews, save Thyself!” yelled one of the soldiers, and again the words were taken up by the crowd and received with jeers and mockery.

“If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us,” said one of the dying thieves, in tones that were bitter with hatred and dislike. But:

“Lord,” pleaded the other thief, “remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom!”

This confession of faith stirred Mary to the heart.

“Amen,” she heard the voice of Jesus, “I say to thee this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise.”

Tenderly, very tenderly, the Mother leaned forward and pressed her lips to the feet of her Beloved. Magdalen, in a transport of passionate grief, had thrown herself upon the ground at the foot of the cross, wiping away the blood that trickled along its bark with her beautiful hair. And Jesus, casting His glance downward, saw the ones He loved—His Mother and His cherished disciple.

“Woman, behold thy son!” He said. John looked up at Him with adoration in his eyes. “Behold thy Mother!” added our blessed Redeemer, gently uniting for the rest of their mortal lives the two who were the dearest to Him on earth.

The sun, which had withdrawn behind the clouds,

was still veiled from view. A darkness seemed to be settling over the earth—a darkness which would have terrified the onlookers had they not been too engrossed in the scene before them.

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”
Oh, the agony of those words!

“I thirst!” He whispered—and one of the soldiers, running, took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and putting it on a reed, held it to His mouth.

Darker and darker grew the lowering clouds. Off to the west sounded a low rumble of thunder.

“It is consummated,” said Jesus.

A strange breeze sprang up; the atmosphere grew so black that even those lost in the sorry spectacle noted it with alarm. One by one the crowd began to melt away. Silence fell again. Then, with the swiftness of a lightning flash, the earth quaked beneath their feet, the rocks were rent in twain.

“Father,” said Christ, the Son of God, “into Thy hands I commend My spirit.”

Thus Jesus died.

But what fearful portents followed on that word! The graves opened. The bodies of the saints came forth from their tombs. The veil of the Temple, the one which separated the holy from the Most Holy Place was rent in twain. All creation trembled at this last sigh of the Man-God. The centurion and the soldiers who guarded Jesus cried out in terror: “Indeed this *was* the Son of God!”

The multitude, horror-stricken and afraid, fled through the darkness.

* * * * *

While Jesus, the Lamb of God and the High Priest of the New Law, was consummating His sacrifice on Mount Calvary, the Jewish priests had been offering their usual sacrificial lamb on Mount Moria. As soon as their sacrifice was over they went to Pilate, requesting him to hasten the death of those who had been crucified, that their bodies might be taken down before sunset.

Joseph of Arimathea, until then a timid and secret disciple of Our Lord, came forward boldly and asked for His body. The Roman Procurator had no objection to grant a private burial for One whom he had so often declared innocent.

Tenderly and carefully the pale form of the Saviour was taken down, wrapped in fine linen and costly spices, and laid away in the new tomb in the garden which was Joseph of Arimathea's property. And then, rolling a great stone to the entrance, they departed.

And Mary, the Mother of Jesus, accompanied by her friends, went back to the little house wherein she lived with Magdalen. She was the Queen of Martyrs, the Mother of Sorrows. . . . But her spirit beheld a vision, which alone kept life within her frame.

She saw the angels of every kingdom, of every age,

of every sphere, rise from each point of space, and salute Christ on the cross.

Every century, past and future, every region, every element had its representative, and each of these in turn obtained regeneration for that which was under his charge. The suns, the stars and space; water, fire, air, and earth; science, art and genius; everything that lives and breathes on the surface of the earth or in its bosom, obtained regeneration. Myriads of angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, moved by in solemn procession, weeping as they contemplated that frightful, though redeeming agony.

Adam came, with his timid companion, and the angels saluted him with their palms of triumph—for man was now purchased for eternity. And they cried:

“Behold the Cross on which is fastened the salvation of mankind. Let us adore it. O holy God! O holy God! O holy, omnipotent, and immortal God, have pity on us!”

Their white wings raised as if they were so many shields, with golden trumpets the angels summoned Abraham, Elias, and David, who answered. Voices arose in the grand chorus:

“The iniquity of the earth is blotted out! The Lord has redeemed His people forever and the Saviour of the world shall reign!”

And an innumerable multitude rose from every point of the earth and space and filled the void

between heaven and hell, whose gates quivered as Lucifer sped down toward them, followed by his evil companions.

O Mary, how thou hast loved the world!

The Tree of Life has been planted once more for humanity. It was sprinkled with most precious blood. It was made victorious over death by the unfathomable mystery of the Redemption.

* * * * *

Long centuries before, when the Israelites came into possession of the Promised Land, after their long journey through the desert, they found a tree half-buried in the earth near Golgotha. This tree was a giant of the forest. Its shape and its bark resembled none of the other trees of Judea.

Attempts were often made to convert it to some use; first, by those who built the city; and again by the architects commissioned by Solomon to build the Temple. Under Esdras they sought to use it for the new Temple of which so many wonders had been predicted.

But the tools could make no impression upon its massive sides. Any idea of utilizing it was totally abandoned, and for a long time it was called the Inviolable Timber.

Now this tree was the Tree of Life.

It bloomed in Eden before the disobedience of

man, but when Sin entered the world and upset all creation, a tempest blew from the four winds of heaven on this garden of delight which Adam had profaned.

Everything was destroyed—and the Tree of Life, blasted by the thunder, tumbled into the abyss which the cataracts of heaven had opened. During the thousands of years that intervened, it was the sport of the torrents that rolled incessantly down to bottomless gulfs. Then came the Deluge, which carried it to the vicinity of Golgotha.

That blackened trunk, that Inviolable Timber, had become historic. And yet, on the day of the Crucifixion, a young and ignorant servant, a stranger in the country, took his saw and cut it as if it were a reed.

This is the old tradition which people tell of the Tree of Life and the Cross of Jesus. A pious legend which none is asked to believe—but a sweet thought, also. That from Life Life should spring again for us!

CHAPTER XXXIX

MARY'S HOLY PASSING

ON the third day, when Salome and Magdalen, Mary of Cleophas and Jezel were making ready to go to the sepulcher, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, lying all these long hours as if in ecstasy upon her couch, sighed softly. It was the first hint of returning life, and gave them intense joy.

A smile irradiated her countenance. Her hands, clasped upon her bosom, were stretched out as if trying to touch some object. The deepest happiness seemed to transfigure her, and they who looked upon her knew that in some way her blessed Son was consoling her.

She who had suffered so much deserved to be comforted the first. She had followed Him in life, along every step of His journey, from the crib to the cross and the tomb.

* * * * *

And now she beheld Him glorious and triumphant. From His resurrection to His ascension the Mother and her Son were never parted in spirit. Her soul was united to God.

After that day of glory, forty days after His resurrection from the dead, that day on which, ascending into heaven, He left His disciples orphans, John, remembering the words of Jesus on the cross, took up his abode with the Mother of Jesus.

And Mary lived many years after these wondrous events. If her Son did not call her to Him sooner it is, doubtless, because He wished that His Mother should be our model, our model in the duties of life and its affections; our model when duties and affections have passed us by.

You who have survived the pomps of life and the pangs of the heart; you who have seen slowly disappear all that charmed and delighted your days; you who can scarcely finish the task begun in joy and prolonged in tears: look at Mary. Mary, who lived on earth after the ascension of Him who crowned her with glory.

She was content to do His will, though her heart sighed for Him. She spent her days in prayer, or watching at the bedside of the sick. She succored the poor, and visited the afflicted, and carried words of sweetness and mercy to repentant sinners.

“Our divine Master has suffered desolation of every kind. He chose to be poor that poverty might be made noble. He would console all those who labor and suffer, and would lift the heavy burden from the shoulders of mankind.”

And if the troubles carried to her were of a heart-

rending nature, as so many of earth's troubles are, she would whisper in her pure tones:

"I have seen a God, who called me His Mother, suffer and die."

And no one could refrain from tears at the terrible picture of desolation called forth by these words.

"I raised my heart to God. He succored me. Direct your thoughts to Him and pray to Him."

And to the sinner:

"Have confidence in your God. He gave His Son to redeem sinners."

Mary, the Mother, the Woman in whom such stupendous wonders were accomplished, the Woman most excellent, Eve regenerated, humbly fulfilled the apostleship which every woman is called to discharge in her own family—the apostleship of sympathetic bounty, mildness, patience, self-denial and mercy, together with the sublime apostleship of motherhood: ay, she was the Mother of God!

She traversed the whole circle of the life of a woman, with its joys and sorrows, from youth to old age, from a life filled with high destinies, to that apex of existence when the world seems to disappear from view. Virgin, Spouse, and Mother most perfect, the hour of her release arrived at last, and with sweet tranquillity she gladly closed her eyes upon the things of earth, dying the death of love, consumed by the purest love for God who deigned to be her own Son.

After her blessed death, John, and those others

who loved her, placed her body in the tomb which they had hollowed out of the rock.

But even while they kept the death-vigil, that holy body disappeared, and when they visited there the following morning, they found but fresh and glowing flowers on the couch of death.

God willed that her body, made sacred by her Son, should not follow the common law. His angels raised it, glorified, to heaven. And there a woman appears, clothed with the sun, having the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

And a voice exclaimed:

“Now is established the salvation and the reign of our God, and the power of His Christ. Wherefore, ye heavens, rejoice, and ye who inhabit the earth rejoice, for redemption has been bestowed upon you.”

* * * * *

Most glorious Virgin, in the midst of thy joys do not forget the sufferings of the earth. Cast an eye of tenderness and mercy on those who are yet in pain and suffering, struggling against difficulties and tasting daily the bitter in the cup of life.

Have pity on the poor child exposed to the dangers of the world; on the mother who fears to survive her children, or who dreads leaving them orphans; on youth, so inexperienced, which weeps over every lost hope; on manhood, which understands and fears

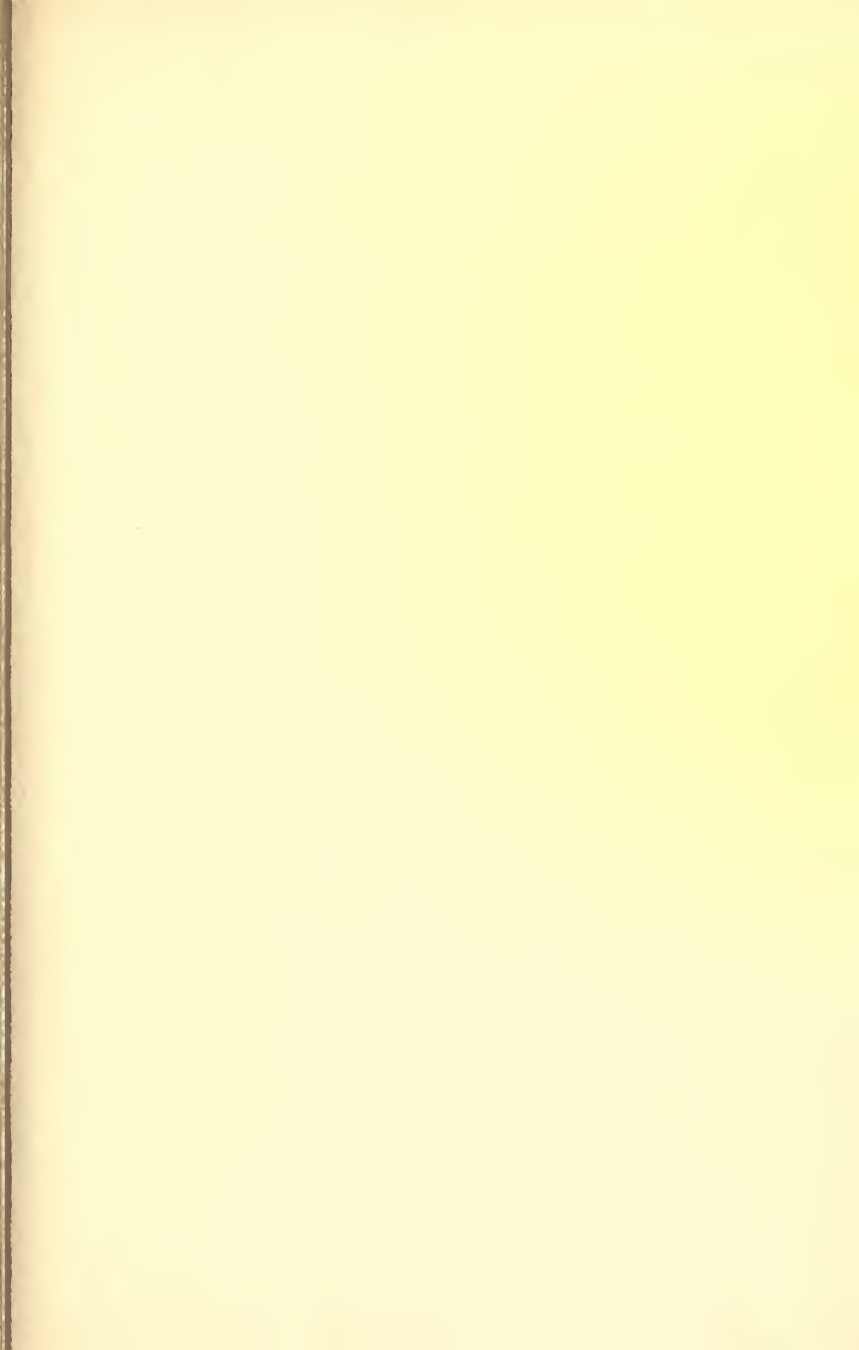
the future, while pondering on the past; on foolish old age, which, heaping days upon days without realizing their value, forgets the end to which time has hurried it.

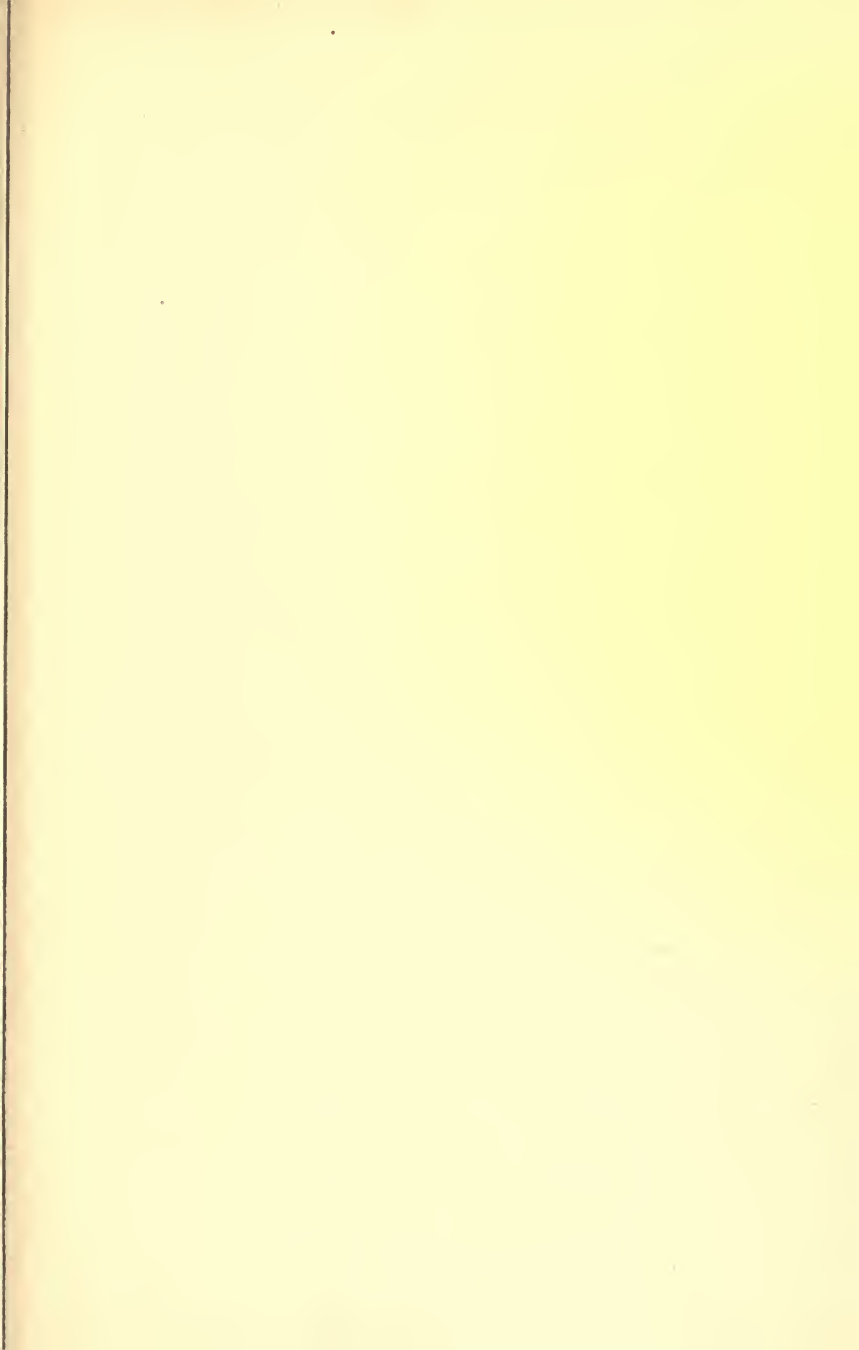
Have pity on those that pray, have pity on those that fear. Pray for us all that all may obtain hope and peace forevermore.

Mistress and Lady, Queen of heaven and Mother of God, Lily of Israel, pray for us!

THE END

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