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HIS BIRTHDAY

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HIS BIRTHDAY



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HIS BIRTHDAY

BY

MARY ELLEN CHASE



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*“Could every time-worn heart but see Thee once again,
A happy, human child among the homes of men,
The age of doubt would cease, the vision of Thy face
Would silently restore the childhood of the race.”*

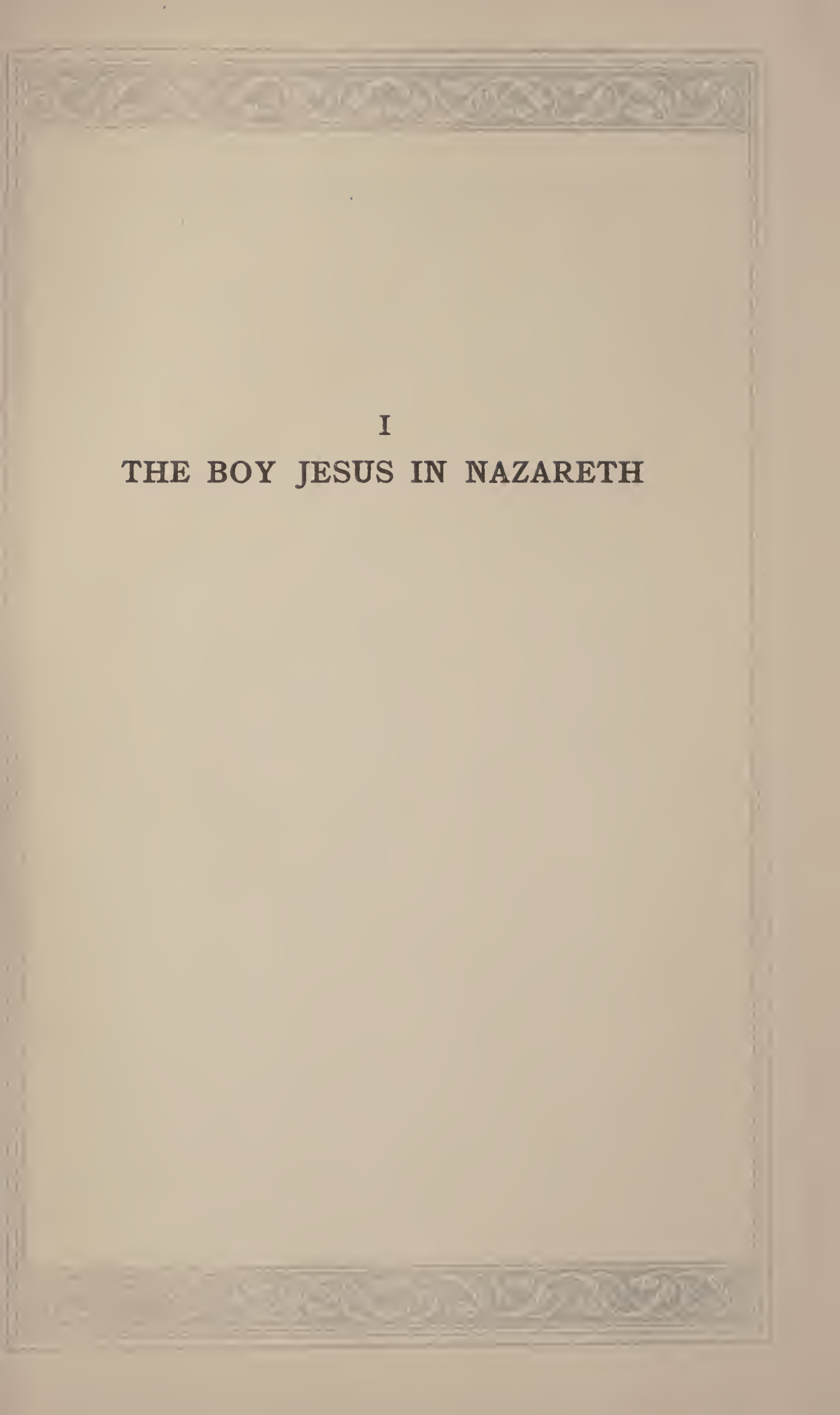
—Henry Van Dyke.



CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. The Boy Jesus in Nazareth	3
II. The Birthday Gifts	19
III. The Story of Jesus' First Birthday Retold	33





I
THE BOY JESUS IN NAZARETH

HIS BIRTHDAY

I

THE BOY JESUS IN NAZARETH

IT was late afternoon in Nazareth of Galilee. Through the narrow streets the laborers from the fields without the village hurried homeward. Workmen, their heavy tools resting on their roughly-clad shoulders, passed weary-footed over the rude stones paving the road. Here and there a bronzed and bearded shepherd, crook in hand, led his flock to safer shelter, for the nights were chill even in the lower hill-folds. Small groups of the soldiers of Augustus, scornful of these silent Hebrews and disgruntled over their own station in this impoverished and remote province of the Empire, sauntered idly along the streets, or gave rude proofs of their authority to the

HIS BIRTHDAY

quiet Nazarenes, to whom the grandeur of Rome meant little save much discomfort and too heavy taxation.

Eastward from the village led a foot-path, worn by the feet of many generations; and along this path through the awakening fields the girls and women of Nazareth went in companies of twos and threes to fill their jars and pitchers of clay and goat-skin at the fountain, whose clear water had for centuries given refreshment not only to the Nazareth folk, but also to the traveller and wayfarer on the dusty, stone-strewn roads of Palestine. It was a joyful little procession at this evening hour, for the heavy rains of early winter had granted one day's respite, and the sun was sinking into the western Mediterranean in a sky as clear and blue as the sea itself. Gladly the women in their bright-colored garments trooped along — some driving small flocks or herds, others holding their pitchers lightly upon their shoulders, or balancing them easily upon their dark, shapely heads; gaily they exchanged greetings or shared some village incident, while the children darted from the path to snatch eagerly

HIS BIRTHDAY

after field-flowers, whose petals the day's long sunshine had opened in the new grass.

At the fountain other and strange faces greeted their own; other and strange words returned their evening welcome; for this fountain without Nazareth was the daily resting-place of many a caravan from Egypt and the farther Eastern deserts, bound for Ephesus or other rich cities of Asia Minor, of companies of white-robed Arabs, bent on ever inscrutable errands, of dark-skinned Numidians, henchmen of Rome, of footsore, many-tongued pilgrims from the lands far beyond Jordan. But simple gratitude for the water which gushed into the stone-built well and trough, a common joy in the sunlit hills, and that strange reverence which all men feel in the mysterious hush of twilight, shattered the barriers of race and speech, and made of the Nazarenes and the travellers comrades in a common fellowship. And as Rebekah gave the servant of Abraham to drink, so the maidens of Nazareth gave drink from their pitchers to the weary and the wayworn who had no jars of their own;

HIS BIRTHDAY

and so, also, did many a Jacob from Egypt or Rome or beyond the Jordan help to water the sheep and fill the jars of the Rachels of Nazareth.

Then as the blue melted into the gold of the later sunset time, and as the Galilean hills deepened and darkened in the glow, those clustered about the fountain went again upon their ways, — the travellers to continue their journeyings until time to camp for the night, the dwellers in Nazareth to go again to their homes. Yet the evening was so rare for the wintry season and the twilight so beautiful, that several, perhaps unhampered by urgent duties at home and loath to lose the sun sooner than necessary, chose to climb the hill back of the village and view the Galilean country at this loveliest time of the day.

Two had preceded them in thought and action — a woman and her child. Already they were halfway up the hill, the woman's white-gowned figure moving lightly, unhaltingly; the child clinging to a fold of her robe, and trying to equal her long, easy steps with his own small feet. On one shoulder she

HIS BIRTHDAY

carried a brown water-jar, which she steadied with a firm hand, and which seemed no impediment to her ascent, for she soon and easily gained the summit and turned her face southward, the child's eyes following her own.

She was of a type rare in Galilee, — a woman well-knit, of large frame, though lithe and graceful of movement. Her skin was fine of texture, clear, and olive in color, save for a healthy glow in her cheeks; her nose and chin, cleanly cut and strong with an emotional kind of strength; her mouth, sweet, appealing, almost sad; her forehead, full and somewhat high, though its height was softened by brown hair parted upon it; her eyes, blue-gray and far apart, were wistful with indiscernible longing, joyous with motherhood, strange with a vision of the Unseen. It was as if they had looked upon the intangible, which is at the heart of things, and had understood — for a moment.

She stood upon the summit of the hill — her hand, long, slender, and finely-cut, beyond the imagination or the skill of any worshipping artist, resting upon the shoulder

HIS BIRTHDAY

of her son. He was very like her — this little boy of hers. He stood leaning against her, one brown hand clutching the fold of her garment, the other playing with her long fingers on his shoulder. His tunic of white wool reached only to his knees, which were sturdy, brown, and bare, as were his legs and loosely sandaled feet. His throat was slender, and the lines of his nose and chin were, even at six years, very like his mother's in strength and sweetness. His hair, heavier and darker than her own, though still brown like the brown of a ripe filbert nut, grew back from his forehead and fell in curls about his neck. His skin was of the same fine texture as that of his mother, but somewhat lighter in color, and his cheeks were tinged with the clear pink of flax blossoms in the fields around Nazareth. Behind the child's joyousness in his deep blue eyes lay the same mystery that haunted her own; the same wistful longing; the same mystic vision. Was that which lay in his a bequest from her, or had he brought both from whence he came?

So they stood together and watched the

HIS BIRTHDAY

sunset glow touch the blue line of the hills of Moab on the southeast, gild the summit of Tabor, and suffuse with purple light the far distances of the Jordan Valley. Snow-clad Hermon reached to Carmel on the south, Carmel swept away to the sea on the southwest, and thus surrounded by a tumbled mass of hills stretched the great Plain of Esdraelon, on whose vast surface Gideon had put to flight the Midianites and Sisera had been conquered. Esdraelon — that great battle ground of ages past and of ages yet to come, when southern hordes should attempt to exterminate by the sword a religion born in this very Nazareth!

Now in the half-light shadowy, slow-moving forms crept here and there in long lines across Esdraelon — caravans plodding northward.

“They are bearing wealth to Rome,” she told him, while his eyes, big with wonder, counted the camels in the dim, uncertain light.

From the southeast, beyond the white roofs of Nain, came a gleam of light, then another and another — the sun’s lingering

HIS BIRTHDAY

rays flashing upon Roman spears and shields. A legion was coming up the Valley of the Jordan, journeying homeward after Parthian conquests perhaps.

“Soldiers!” cried the child, his eyes shining. “Soldiers of Augustus! When I am grown, I, too, perhaps may bear a spear and shield. Would that please thee, mother?”

She looked at him tenderly, caressed his cheek, and drew his dark head closer.

“The Holy City of thy fathers lies southward,” she said, “and Bethlehem where thou wast born; far beyond Esdraelon and the hills of Samaria and the waste places of Judah. Thou hast been in Jerusalem with thy father and me at the time of the Passover, but thou rememberest it little. When thou art older grown, thou wilt perhaps journey there again, and learn to become a priest in the great temple.”

Her eyes, vague with dreams, sought the southern mountains. The child laughed thoughtfully.

“My father would wish me to be a carpenter in Nazareth,” he said, “and thou, a priest in the great temple, and I, a soldier

HIS BIRTHDAY

of Augustus, but braver than those who dwell in our village.”

His mother's eyes gleamed with an instant's fleeting vision; his mother's arm drew him closer.

“The dreams of a mother are strangely real,” she said at last. “Some day thou shalt be at Jerusalem in the great temple. Of that I am very sure. But the darkness is hastening. We must go down to thy father who awaits us, and to the stories I promised thee. Thou hast not forgotten?”

“No,” he answered eagerly, as they descended in the half-light. “All day I have been waiting; and my father's gift was all but ready for me when we went to draw the water. It must be now quite complete.”

“And mine, also.”

“Hast thou a gift besides, mother?” he cried joyfully, his face aglow. “Hast thou truly one besides? Shall I know to-night? I need not wait till morning! Say that I need not!”

She smiled, glad in his happiness. “Thou needst not wait,” she promised, his hand in hers. “Thou mayest have it to-night. Take

HIS BIRTHDAY

care, dear, lest the stones pierce thy feet. Thy sandals are worn, and I would not have thee hurt."

Slowly the western glow died away. The hills, darker grown, seemed to withdraw farther into the shadows, as though the sun had unlocked their mysteries, they all unwilling. One star gleamed over Carmel as the boy and his mother left the hill-path for the narrow village street. A few minutes and the street had widened into a kind of village gathering-ground and meeting-place where town councils were held and where the boys of Nazareth enjoyed their sports and games. Of late years, much to the discomfort of the Nazarenes, the Roman guards had made this their rendezvous; and the lads of Nazareth, like other lads of all countries and all times, could not refrain from gathering here to gaze with mingled hatred and admiration upon the shining helmets, the carven shields, and the mighty spears of Rome.

To-night, as was not unusual, there was apparently trouble. A crowding together of boys and soldiers, a shout of triumph fol-

HIS BIRTHDAY

lowed by indignant cries, betokened its presence as the boy and his mother approached. The child saw quickly what had happened.

“It is Joel!” he cried. “The lame son of Isaac, the sheep-herder! They have broken his new ball, which but yesterday his father bought from a trader, and they play with the halves!”

He sprang from his mother’s side, and ran with all his might into the shouting group of men and boys. The shouting ceased, the soldiers of Augustus fell back, the boys stood still. The child’s eyes were dark with anger, his lips quivered, his hands were clenched tightly.

“What is this thou doest?” he cried, addressing the foremost soldier. “Thou hast broken Joel’s ball by rough handling, and he a cripple! And thou a soldier of the great Augustus!”

The soldier stared stupidly. “Nay, it was but in sport,” he mumbled, unable to fathom the strange awe with which this child inspired him. “It was but in sport.”

“It is but poor sport,” cried the child again, “and unworthy! Wouldst thou call it

HIS BIRTHDAY

sport if thou wert Joel and he a soldier of Augustus? Give me the halves. My father will join them in his workshop if I ask him. Come thou with me, Joel!"

He passed to the center of the silent, astonished circle, and placed his arm about the shrunken shoulders of a crippled boy with sad, drawn features.

"Come thou with me, Joel," he whispered, "My father will to-morrow mend thy ball. It shall be as good as new then, I promise thee. Come!"

They moved away across the open space to the entrance of a narrow street beyond. The crowd dispersed, the soldiers half-scornful, half-subdued; the boys, perplexed, incredulous. The child's mother followed him, pride and wonder in her heart.

"Some day all will be well with thee, Joel," she heard him say. "Something tells me that some day thou shalt be a cripple no longer. Wait and see if I do not tell thee true."

Shy, half-embarrassed, very grateful, the crippled boy gazed at this child, who was younger than himself, but whom he strangely

HIS BIRTHDAY

revered and loved. Then turning on his rough crutches, he started down the narrow street, looking back every now and then until the child and his mother disappeared around another and sharper curve of the crooked road.



II
THE BIRTHDAY GIFTS

II

THE BIRTHDAY GIFTS

HURRIEDLY now the two went homeward, she holding him closely within a fold of her garment, for the night grew cold, and soon they reached the western outskirts of Nazareth where their home lay, together with the adjoining workshop of Joseph, the carpenter.

It was into this workshop that they entered first, the child throwing aside the restraining garment fold, and drawing his mother eagerly after him. The low room was small and confusedly littered by stray tools and loose scraps of wood and iron. In one corner several pieces of unfinished work, patiently waiting completion, were huddled together; in another, nearest the door, stood a table, on whose rough, unplanned surface was heaped a motley collection of bruised and battered toys — headless spears, dilapidated kite-frames, broken chariots.

A man, bent and heavily bearded, sat on a rude bench in the center of the little shop, and by the flickering and uncertain glare of

HIS BIRTHDAY

a torch-light polished and re-polished something which he held upon his knees. He raised his head as the two entered, his dark eyes, so common to his race, giving them welcome. Then without comment he would have resumed his task, had not the child laid a resisting hand upon his arm.

“ See, father, here are the halves of Joel’s ball.” And he held in either outstretched hand the cracked and mutilated pieces of wood. “ The soldiers of Augustus tore it from him, and broke it by rough play. But I said thou couldst mend it for him. And thou canst, father? ”

The man looked from the child’s mother to the child, and then toward the table with its load of sad, broken things.

“ Place Joel’s ball there with the other toys, my son,” he said. “ To-morrow I will mend them all for thy friends. But to-day I have given up all to complete thy gift. Come nearer to the light. Art thou pleased? ”

The boy stood beneath the light which glowed around his dark head and eager face. In his outstretched arms his father placed a long, narrow box, made of Lebanon cedar

HIS BIRTHDAY

and sweet to the smell. It was polished well, and fastened by a shining clasp. The child's eyes shone, as he held, examined, and opened it.

“Art thou pleased?” his father asked again, almost wistfully.

“It is beautiful, father!” he cried. “Is it not, mother?” She nodded, smiling, glad in his joy. “And now my treasures need lie no longer in the great chest, but may be in my new box. May I have it? Is it quite complete?”

“It needs but one more dressing of oil, and then a little polishing to make it quite complete,” the man answered. “Go with thy mother and get thy treasures ready. I will soon bring it to thee.”

They passed through the workshop and a little inner court to the dimly-lighted house, low-storied and white-walled, built somewhat after the manner of the rich homes of Rome with atrium and rooms opening on either side, but small, crude in its workmanship, and primitive in its furnishings. The woman, followed by the eager child, walked hurriedly the length of the poor center room to

HIS BIRTHDAY

a chest near the farther door, pulled from it a rude cover of goat-skins, raised the lid, and drew forth with careful fingers a small bundle, wrapped in white wool, and tied with thongs of skin.

“Here are thy treasures, dear,” she said, unknottling the tough thongs. “Here are the gold coins which the strange and wise men from the Far East brought thee, and the alabaster boxes of frankincense and sweet myrrh; and here the olive branch which the shepherds from the hills without Bethlehem gave thee, and the dried flower placed in thy hand by the sweet-voiced herdsboy on the hills north of Nazareth. And the wool in which they are wrapped is that in which I wrapped thee to keep thee from the cold.”

She gave the loosened bundle into his hands, and watched him, as, sitting on a low stool by her side, he drew out each gift separately and gazed at it lovingly; then arranged each in order in the lap of his tunic.

“They must be tired of the great chest,” he mused with quaint fancy. “Weary of lying so often unnoticed among so many

HIS BIRTHDAY

other things. They will like the new box, will they not, mother? ”

“ Yes, ” she said, “ I am sure that they will. But I forget. There is yet something in the great chest. My own gift for thee. ”

He would have sprung from the stool in his eager excitement had he not remembered the treasures in his lap.

“ Draw it from the chest, mother, ” he entreated, “ but slowly, while I bind these again in the wool. ”

She obeyed, opening the lid slowly, and awaiting his preparation.

“ Now! ” he cried, laying the bundle upon the stool, and standing beside her. “ Now! ”

She drew a second and larger bundle from the chest, and unfolded its contents, bringing before his shining eyes a little coat of red and blue wool, the colors curiously intermingled. He put it on at once over his white tunic, and embraced her rapturously.

“ Oh! ” he cried. “ A new coat! And bright like that which Joseph’s father gave him in the stories thou tellest me! ”

She laughed as joyously as he. “ And I made it for thee as Hannah of old made that

HIS BIRTHDAY

of little Samuel in the same stories of our people. Dost remember? ”

He nodded. Then —

“ See! ” he whispered. “ An old man begs entrance at our door. He is like the prophets of our race of which thou tellest me. ”

Quite unconscious in their joy they had not heeded the entrance of a stranger, who now rested wearily against the door-post — a very old man with the long white beard of the patriarchs and the searching eyes of the seers. He stood staff in hand, and gazed in strange incredulity at the woman and the child, who, half in fear, half in awe, clung to his mother’s garment.

“ It is even so the same child and his mother, ” spoke the old man in deep tones, more to himself than to them, while his eyes ever scanned their faces. “ Verily, the Spirit hath led me to this house, as six years since It led me to the temple where I first beheld his glory. ”

Still lost in wonder he stood there. So deep in meditation was he that he did not heed the woman’s greeting of welcome; did not perceive that the child, his shyness

HIS BIRTHDAY

conquered, had left his mother's side and with pretty courtesy had come forward to add his solicitation to her own; did not note in the shadows behind the two the dark figure of the silent Nazarene carpenter.

The woman spoke first. "My father," she said, gently and reverently, "thou art wayworn and weary. Rest with us this night, and on the morrow continue thy journey. Lay thyself upon this couch. Thou honorest our house by thy presence. My son, wilt thou bring water and oil, while I prepare food and drink?"

The child started eagerly to obey, but the old man came forward and placed his hand upon the boy's head.

"Thou dost not know me, my son."

"Nay, master," said the child. "Yet in my father's house is no man a stranger, but a friend."

"Dost thou know me, my daughter?"

"I know thee." She spoke quietly, but intently, and as though those simple words brought memories, rushing over her, engulfing her in their sacredness. "I know thee. Thou art one Simeon, — he who was in the temple when we brought the child to do

HIS BIRTHDAY

sacrifice before the Lord. Thou raised him in thine arms and blessed him." She turned toward the bent figure of her husband, who had come to her side, and whose years seemed strangely multiplied in contrast with her own fresh youthfulness.

"Thou rememberest, my husband?"

"Yea, verily," said the Nazarene carpenter. And then to his guest, "Father, thou wilt abide with us in peace to-night? My son already brings water for thy feet, and his mother will give thee food."

The old man sank gratefully upon the couch toward which they had led him.

"I will rest and partake of thy food," he said, "that a blessing may be upon this house, and a greater upon mine own head. But then must I resume my journey. I go to Cana in Galilee to assist there in the consecration of a temple. I have been wondrously led to this house. May God's blessing rest upon it!"

The carpenter bent his dark, heavy head; the child, drawing near with basin and water-jar, paused a moment to bend his own. Then he came and knelt by the couch.

HIS BIRTHDAY

“I would unloose thy sandals, my father, and wash and anoint thy feet,” he said.

“Thy service to the wayworn hath already begun, my son, — that I perceive. And thine age? Is it in truth six years since thou wast born?”

The child, kneeling before him, raised his eager, flushed face.

“This is my birthday eve, my father. It is six years to-night since I was born in Bethlehem of Judea.” He bent to his task, his curls falling around his face, in every sensitive line of which was written the pride he felt because he, a little boy, was allowed to do graciously for the stranger within his father’s house.

Painstakingly he untied the dusty sandal knots, removed the sandals, and placed the tired feet in the deep, water-filled basin. Gently he kneaded the weary, aching muscles with his child’s fingers, then dried the feet upon the towel with which he had girded himself, and lastly anointed them with soothing oil. Meanwhile his mother brought nourishing cakes and fresh goat’s milk, of which the old man gratefully partook.

HIS BIRTHDAY

The boy, his task finished, carried away his basin, jar, and oil-flask, and then, returning, stole to his father, who sat silently apart.

“ Was it well done, father? ” he whispered. “ Thou couldst have better served him, that I know, but I tried to pattern after thee. Was it well done? ”

“ Yes, my son, thy father is proud of thee.”

The voice of the old man rose through the quiet room.

“ My son, I now resume my journey to Cana of Galilee. I would bless thee before I go. Draw near with thy father.”

The boy came at once across the stone floor, his father following more slowly. Their guest had arisen and stood facing the door. The child knelt before him, his father and mother behind their son on either side. Then the old man placed his thin, trembling hands on the boy's bent head. His voice, deep with strange and strong emotion, rang through the room.

“ As six years past in Jerusalem I held this child in my arms and blessed him, even

HIS BIRTHDAY

so now do I bless him in his father's house.

“ ‘ Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have again seen Thy salvation,

“ ‘ Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people.

“ ‘ A light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel.’ ”

And in the stillness which followed, Joseph and the child's mother marvelled much at those things which were spoken.

Thereafter, the old man blessed them also, while the child still knelt, and said to his mother strange words, — words heard six years before and, as then, — poignant with suffering.

“ ‘ Yea, my daughter, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also.’ ”

Then gathering his garment in one hand and taking his staff in the other, he passed over the threshold and into the darkness without.



III

THE STORY OF
JESUS' FIRST BIRTHDAY RETOLD

III
THE STORY OF
JESUS' FIRST BIRTHDAY RETOLD

SILENTLY the carpenter withdrew to his corner of the little atrium; silently the child watched his mother who stood, her hands pressed against her heart, and gazed with wide-open, frightened eyes into the darkness whence had passed their guest. She saw there neither the lights of Nazareth nor the moon that silvered the Galilean hills; but before her eyes rose the white pillars of the temple at Jerusalem, the purple altar-cloth, the smoke of incense ascending; and in her ears above the voices of the chanting priests, sounded the piteous cry of doves brought for sacrifice. Her son watched her, his own face troubled.

“Mother,” he said, his arms around her. “Thou lookest sad. Our guest was very strange. Didst thou understand his words?”

Her arms held him close, drew him closer.

“Didst thou?” he persisted.

“Not fully, dear,” she said at last. “Yet they were all a part of his blessing, I doubt

HIS BIRTHDAY

not. But come, it draws late. The moon is rising over the hills of Moab, and it is already past thy bed-time."

"But the stories! We need not give them up? Say we need not, mother!"

Her eyes, smiling at his eagerness, lost their look of fear.

"We need not," she told him, "but hasten! Thy treasures are on the stool by the great chest; and the new box I saw thy father place upon thy bed in the eastward room. Run, give him thy thanks, and bid him good-night."

He ran eagerly to where his father sat, still apart and alone, and kissed his dark, bearded face.

"I am going to put them in it now, father," he whispered. "Come and see, and hear the stories. Wilt thou?"

"Later, perhaps, my son, but I have tasks yet to do. Go to thy mother who awaits thee. I am glad the box pleases thee."

The child bounded away, hop-skippping in his eagerness across the rough floor to the room where his mother awaited him. Hastily he prepared for the night, folding with great

HIS BIRTHDAY

precision his new coat and placing it at the foot of his bed, changing his woolen tunic for a lighter gown, and washing his dusty little feet in the same basin in which he had bathed the traveller's, though his own were less carefully done. Lastly, he knelt beside his mother, and, with her arm close around him, with his hands folded and his eyes closed, he said his evening prayer — a prayer which, like that of every child, ascended to Heaven an offering, not a petition. Then clambering into her lap, he placed his new box upon his knees, and from the bundle on the bed drew the first of his treasures.

“The olive branch, mother. Tell about that.”

She cuddled him close in her arms. “That olive branch,” she began, but he interposed hastily.

“Thou forgettest the beginning, mother. ‘Long years ago, on the very day that thou wast born — ’”

She laughed. Then she began again.

“Long years ago, on the very day that thou wast born — six years ago this very night, dear — thy father and I were travel-

HIS BIRTHDAY

ling toward Jerusalem to pay our tax to the great emperor Augustus. The roads were hard for the winter rains had been heavy, and as at nightfall we reached Bethlehem, I grew tired and ill. Like many others going up to Jerusalem for the same purpose, we stopped at the inn just without the village, and asked shelter for the night, but — ”

“ There was no room for thee.” Again the child interrupted, his eyes dark with pity. “ This part always makes me sad, mother — to think there was no room for thee when thou wast ill and weary.”

She kissed him. “ Nay, dear, do not be sad. The inn-keeper was kind, but there were others who had come before us, also weary and very likely ill. He could not ask them to give us their beds; but he offered us the only shelter left, the stable without the inn. Thy father was loath to accept it, thinking it too poor shelter for me, but it was late and we dared look no farther.

“ It was not uncomfortable, dear, nor very cold. Many of the inn-keeper’s sheep were still upon the hills, so that there was room for the asses and horses of the travellers,

HIS BIRTHDAY

and one large, straw-filled manger in which I could rest. And the breath of the kind creatures standing about made the air warmer, so that I did not suffer from the cold."

He was smiling again and listening eagerly. "And there I was born."

"There thou wast born." She spoke softly, her face suffused with joy. "Very, very early in the morning while it was still dark without. Through an opening in the roof, I could see from where I lay the sky, filled with stars. And one star, bigger and brighter than all the rest, seemed to be looking down upon me, and thee in my arms, and thy father standing near."

The child was sitting upright in his excitement, his eyes glowing, his breath coming quickly.

"And didst thou see angels, mother? Tell me truly this time! Were there angels in the sky? Didst thou see them?"

Thoughtfully she studied his face, while he, impatient, awaited her answer.

"Dear," she said at last, "I cannot tell thee truly, for I do not know. Angels are very near to every mother when she first

HIS BIRTHDAY

realizes that her baby has been born. But whether the angels were truly in the sky or just as truly in my own heart, I cannot tell. Dost thou wish greatly that there had been angels? ”

“I am sure there were, mother,” he answered positively. “Remember thou wast tired and ill, and thou couldst not see clearly perhaps. But my father saw them and heard them sing. He told me but to-day in the workshop. And the shepherds — thou rememberest them, and what they told thee about the angels? ”

“Truly, I remember them. I was just to tell you of them. As I lay looking at the star, there appeared in the open door-way of the stable a light, and the dim figures of shepherds. They seemed half-frightened and shy of approach, but as thy father went forward to greet them, they asked if a child had not been born in that very place. Then he told them of thee, and they crowded around thee and me, — bent and bearded men, but kindly. One held his rude lantern above thy face so as to see thee more clearly, and the others knelt and strangely honored

HIS BIRTHDAY

thee — a simple babe. And one, the eldest and most bent, placed this olive branch within thy tiny hand.”

“And they said?” the child persisted.

She read his thought. “They said that as one of their number watched their flocks upon the hillside, a star, brighter than all other stars, shone in the sky, and angels sang of thy birth in a Bethlehem manger. And that the one watching aroused the others, heavy with sleep, and following the star, they found thee as the angels had sung.”

“And thou believest my father and the shepherds, dost thou not, mother?”

“I have always believed thy father, dear. In his great joy over thee, I am sure he saw and heard the angels; and the shepherds of our land have often talked with angels in their lonely watches on the hills.”

Thoughtfully he placed the olive branch in his new box; and then from the bundle drew the alabaster boxes of frankincense and myrrh and the little bag filled with the strange coins.

“Now about these, mother, which the strange men from the East brought me.”

HIS BIRTHDAY

“That was later,” she told him. “Thou wast twelve days old when they came. They were strange men from the countries far to the east of us, with the long beards of patriarchs and singular white robes and hats. Their eyes were dark and piercing and very deep, as though they were wise and learned, and they had read of thy coming in the stars they said, for they possessed strange knowledge of the heavens — knowledge which our people do not understand.”

“And had they also seen the same bright star in their far homes?” he asked.

“They told a wonderful story of how a star had guided them long days and nights across the deserts, as they journeyed on their beautiful horses, while camels bore their goods and food, and dark servants waited upon their needs. There were three of them, but so strangely alike were they in their white robes that I could ill distinguish one from the others. They came and knelt before thee, and from the deep folds of their garments drew these gifts which they had brought from afar to proffer thee. They made strange signs one to another, and spoke

HIS BIRTHDAY

words which I did not understand, and their wisdom frightened me somewhat. But they loved thee — I, thy mother, could perceive that — even as the Judean shepherds loved thee.”

“And were the camels even larger than those that cross Esdraelon?”

“I could hardly say truly, dear, for I saw them but dimly through the stable door as they were kneeling in the courtyard. But they were great creatures, I know, and their trappings were of rich cloths, gold-trimmed and of bright colors.”

He sighed — a long, deep sigh. “I wish I could remember it all,” he said wistfully. “Thou hast told me so often it seems as though I do remember. I will place these treasures with the olive branch in the box, and now there is left but the flower. It has grown so withered I wonder that it does not break. It will fare better in the new box.”

Gently he unwound the wrappings from the tiny, withered remnant of a seeded flower, which he held carefully in the palm of his hand.

HIS BIRTHDAY

“Every time I look at thee I fear thou wilt have crumbled away,” he whispered. And then, “Tell me about it, mother.”

“Thou wast little more than a year old when it was given thee,” she said. “I took thee in my arms one day and went with thee upon the hills. It was a day very like this one, the rains having ceased for a little. Thou wast so joyful at the sight of the new blossoms and so happy in the sunshine that I wandered far with thee over the hills toward the north. And in a little valley there, bright with many-colored flowers, I found a shepherd boy with his flock.

“He was an earnest-faced lad of Joel’s age perhaps, roughly-clad, but gentle and gracious of manner, and when he saw thee laughing at the flowers, he left his crook upon the ground and came toward thee. And as he came he pulled from among the many blossoms all about, this one which was not a blossom at all, but a seed-ball covered with tiny winged seeds of thistle down. Then he knelt in the soft grass and passed the flower up to thee, and thy little hands were outstretched eagerly as though it were

HIS BIRTHDAY

fresh and bright of hue. Then thou pursed thy little lips and blew against the seeds, and they sailed away over the meadow. But thy fingers clung to this, and when I saw thy love for it, I put it away for thee. He was a strange lad, I think," she finished, musingly, "else he would have given thee a flower."

The child was silent for a moment. "Perhaps, an angel told him I would like the little seed-ball," he whispered. "Just as the angel told me that some day Joel would be a cripple no longer. Dost think an angel told him, mother?"

"It is not unlikely," she said. "Angels would tell us much if we would but listen. Dear, place the little seed-ball with the other treasures in thy box, and then I must put thee in thy bed to sleep. Thou art tired and must rest if to-morrow we are to go upon the hills."

"May I not keep my treasure-box by me while I sleep?" he pleaded. "Then I shall know that it is safe. Say that I may, mother."

"Thou mayest," she promised him. "But

HIS BIRTHDAY

lay thee down, dear. One song I will sing thee before thou sleepest. Which shall it be?"

He pondered, deciding, as she smoothed the coverlet, and tucked him in securely against the cold night air. Then, as she kissed him,

"Sing the shepherd song of our fathers. That pleases me, I think, the most of all. Perhaps the shepherd boy who gave me the flower sings it when he is alone with his sheep. Dost think so, mother?"

"I am sure he does," she said.

Sitting by him, she held one hand in hers, while the other rested on his precious box, which he had encircled closely with his arm. Then his mother watching sang him to sleep:

"Jehovah, the Lord, is my shepherd. I shall want
for nothing.

In green pastures He maketh me to rest; by still
waters He leadeth me.

Through His mercy is my soul restored."

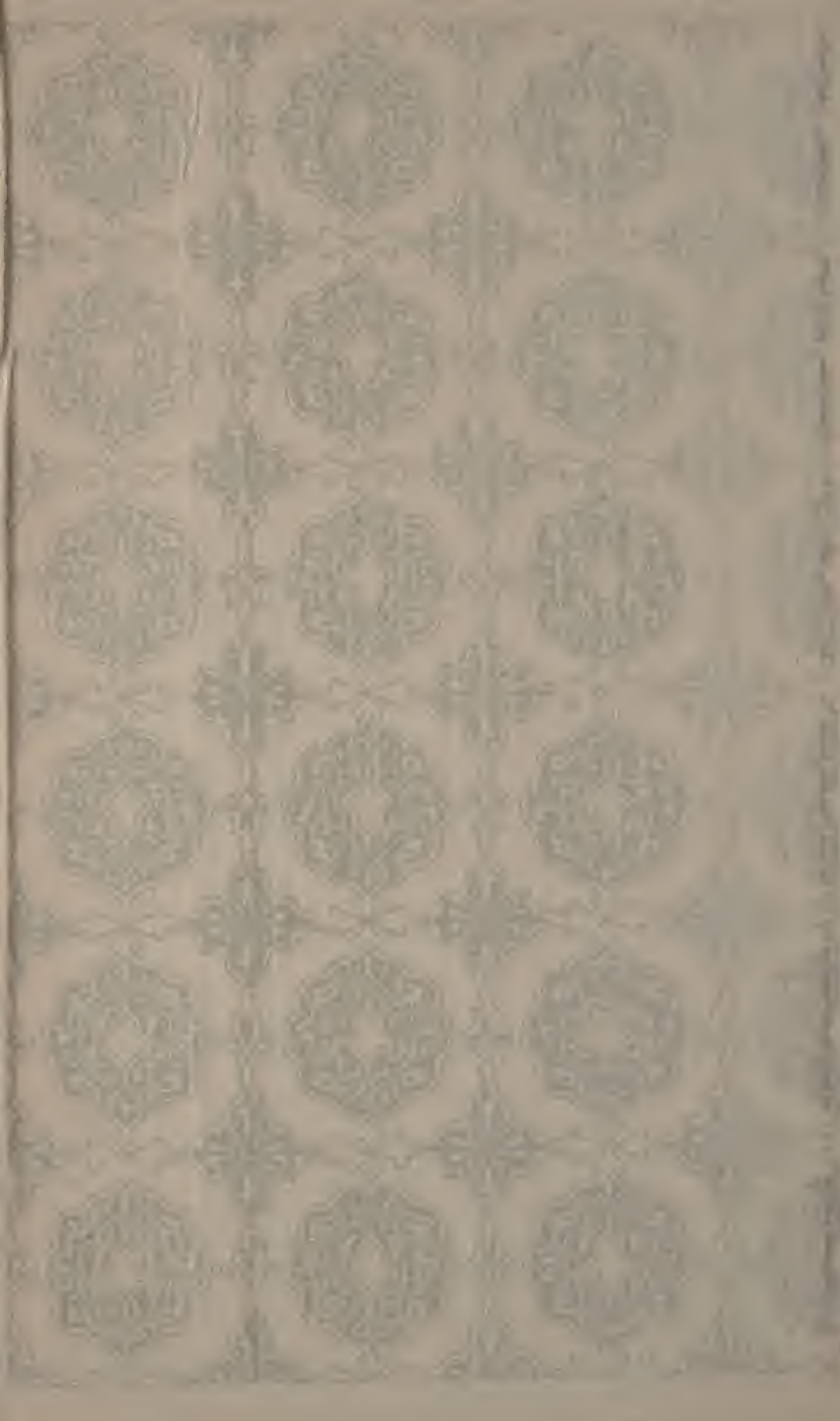
Almost at once he slept, wearied by happiness. Gently she placed the hand which she held beneath the coverlet; very gently she brushed back a lock of hair, which had

HIS BIRTHDAY

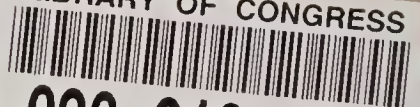
fallen across his forehead. Then, bending forward, she watched her little boy asleep. Across the threshold of the doorway a shadow fell, and Joseph, the carpenter, came to sit beside her. Together they gazed upon him, — his hair dark upon the pillow, a smile upon his face, in the circle of his arm his precious box. Together they loved him.

The hours of the night waned; the moon journeyed toward its resting-place in Mediterranean waters; the hills of Moab waited — patient, undistracted, faithful. It was very still. But when the stillness was at its height, when all discordant sounds had ceased, there gleamed and quivered over those hills of Moab a star!

And who shall say that angels did not sing — behind the veil which faithlessness has woven? Perhaps the child's heart, listening, heard them, for the two watching saw him smile, and hold his treasures yet more closely as he slept.



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