WHEN MARY WALKED THE EARTH

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INTRODUCTION

Aside from the few tremendously significant actions and words of Mary recorded in the gospel story of her Son, we know all too little about her. But what we know is gracious, tender, queenly, wonderfully beautiful.

The episodes related in the following pages do not pretend to be historic. Perhaps they never happened. But we may be sure that episodes like them must have happened. For we know Mary best from her effect on history; and from what we have seen of her influence on the lives of mankind, and from what we know of the inspiration and power of her example, may we not say that incidents like these followed her in her path through life?

THE MONEY CHANGER

A Lovely Little Girl Looks Into His Heart

Before him, on his little table, stood neat stacks of gold and silver. Judean coins were there, and the beautiful coinage of Greece stood beside the stern face of Augustus on Roman silver. Back of him cooed his pigeons, rustling their wings against the bars of the wicker cages.

It had been a good day, and he eyed speculatively the throngs of pilgrims who passed up and down the Temple stair. Those keen city dwellers interested him very little. One was not quite safe in short-changing them. But those simple country folk who came with their coins tied in some corner of their clothing, and their hesitant eyes and blundering hands, they were the customers to his taste. For if he gave them a handful of coins, part Greek, part Syrian, part Roman, they nodded over them and went away afraid to protest, while he rubbed his hands and counted another slick profit.

Up the stairs toward his table and cages came an elderly man and his wife, plainly people of some obscure province, Galilee probably. He thought, as he watched their frightened eyes regarding the Temple porticos and the self-effacing way in which the old couple stepped aside to let others hurry by. The seller of pigeons spat contemptuously, and then, with almost a jerk, leaned forward.

Between the old couple, clinging to their hands, walked the most exquisite little girl, her bright blonde hair, rare enough in Jerusalem, escaping in errant curls from beneath her silken veil. Her wide, astonished eyes seemed filled with a thrilling light as they gazed with wonder on the beauty of God’s house, and her lips, beautifully formed and delicately red, opened in a happy smile.

DOVES FOR THE SACRIFICE

“Their grandchild,” decided the seller, and he wondered how so plain a couple could be the forebears of so lovely a child.

As they came abreast of the table, the old man turned and spoke quietly to his wife. Then, carefully threading their way through the crowd, they came toward the seller’s table, leading with them the little girl, whose eyes now turned from the colonnades of the Temple to the soft-cooing doves in their cages.

“Doves for the sacrifice,” suggested the pigeon seller ingratiatingly.

“Two,” said the old man, fumbling with his ancient leathern purse.

“None finer in Jerusalem,” chattered the pigeon seller, with a professional cheerfulness he used to distract and disarm his victims. “Spotless, unblemished, all white, this spring’s hatching,” and he lifted two pigeons from the cage with practiced skill, “and cheap, very cheap.”

The old man took the pigeons gingerly and handed them to his wife, and fumbled again for his coins.

“Ah a beautiful grandchild!” said the pigeon seller, still bent on distracting his customer when the moment for change-making came.

“Our daughter, Mary,” corrected the woman, with a touch of motherly pride.

“So?” exclaimed the seller. “Never have I seen a fairer.” As he spoke, the woman set one of the pigeons on the outstretched arm of the little girl, who clasped the dove to her and stood with curved cheek nestling against its white feathers. Quite trustingly the dove settled down in her arms, snuggling warmly against her.

THE GOLDEN COIN

"Here," said the old man, holding out a golden coin, "is the smallest coin I have."

It was the opportunity for which the seller had waited. With skilful hands he assembled from his stack of coins a curious mixture of little pieces, Greek, Syrian, Roman. Judean, and ostentatiously dropped them one by one into the outstretched hand of the buyer, keeping up a rapid chatter as he did so. From under his long eyelashes he watched the guileless face of the old man for the moment when he felt it would be safe to stop counting.

"There," the pigeon seller said, stopping five counts short. "Your change, exact and honest."

"Thank you," said the old man, putting the coins into his purse.

"Come, Anna. Come, Mary." Then, in a sudden burst of confidence, he turned to the pigeon seller. "Today we offer our little daughter to service in the Temple. It is at proud day for us and a sad one, for she is our only child."

Up the Temple stairs the trio moved, while the pigeon seller gazed after them with a troubled expression. Giving that lovely child to the Temple! And their only child at that! The fools!

They reached the landing above him, and then as the old couple passed on before her, the little girl turned and looked back full into his eyes. With her pigeon held to her heart, she gazed at him, pity, rebuke, sorrow in her childlike but bright expression.

THE RESTITUTION

With a cry the man leaped from the table, snatched up two handfuls of coins, dropping as he did so pieces that slipped unregarded between his fingers. Up the stairs he dashed and flung himself at the feet of the child.

"See," he cried, pouring his coins into her dress. "Gold and silver for you."

The old couple turned to regard him in startled surprise.

"Why this?" asked the old man.

Furtively the pigeon seller rose. He could not say that he was making reparation for dishonesty. He hardly knew that the eyes of the child had lifted his soul above his money tables. He groped for words.

"In the Temple—she will need this—for her comfort— God's service—"

"Thank you," murmured the old man, bowing as one who conferred rather than received a favour. "You are very kind."

But the eyes of the child were speaking to the pigeon seller the silent gratitude that he alone heard.

SO CLOSE TO HEAVEN

A Youthful Sceptic Sees a Woman and Believes in His Own Soul

Under the rippling silken curtain stretched above the roof of the white Judean house the Sadducee sat and talked brilliantly. Young Benjamin sat at the feet of this wise old man, watched the slim wrinkled fingers as he pulled his grey beard or beat a quiet tattoo against the heavy silk of his robe, watched his shrewd eyes as they grew suddenly brilliant when he uttered some startling argument, and felt, as youth will feel in the presence of a magnetic personality, that there was no answer for his keen, brutal reasoning.

"We Sadducees, my boy," the old man summed up, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the listening boy with that gracious familiarity that lends so much intimacy to conversation, "have long since given up what you call the supernatural. Your heaven is here, 0 Israel. Your immortality lies in the memory of your deeds, the strength and beauty of your children, the nobility of your law, the imperishable grandeur of your nation. If there be a Jehovah, he dwells in remote aloofness, regarding his creatures as you, my boy, might regard the shadowy animals you form with your fingers between a taper and a white wall. And Jehovah grows tired of us as you grow tired of your badly shaped shadows, until one day He pulls back His hand, and poof! there is nothing left but the meaningless world, or, if you prefer, the blank white wall.

SLAYING A SOUL

"Life, my boy, is in the important present. Trust your own hands and brain more than you trust a remote Jehovah. Work so hard that you have no time left to pray. Pack this life with all it can hold of joy and work and achievement.

Use it to the full; for, when it is gone, spent out golden day by golden day, there is no other. We are creatures of time whose God has forgotten us and whose destination is the grave."

"And the Messiah?" questioned the boy eagerly.

"A delusion. We have waited as our fathers have waited, but He will never come."

Benjamin arose and bowed low before the aged scholar who gave him a heavily ringed hand to place against his forehead. Then, slipping down the stair from the housetop Benjamin walked rapidly through the warm, narrow Nazarene street. But as he walked he felt that something very precious had gone out of the day, killed by the keen rapier words of the Sadducee. The world seemed suddenly lonesome, as if the great Jehovah was no longer there. He gazed forward into his own life, through the years—long years, he hoped—he had yet to live; and then he saw the shadow of a white, rounded, repulsive sepulchre. He stumbled against a projecting rock, and the instinctive prayer for protection, the prayer he had learned from his mother, leaped from his lips, but he crushed it back ruthlessly, smiling sadly that tradition and training had for a moment made him forget new, bright truths.

Almost he wished he had not gone to visit that learned Sadducee dwelling in Nazareth for a short rest after busy Jerusalem. His faith had been a precious thing and now he felt that it was gone and he stood alone with his dead faith as one standing above a dead friend murderously struck down.

THE CARPENTER'S HOME

Thanks to the powers of fate or whatever ruled this meaningless world, there was the present matter of that carpenter his father had commissioned him to engage. In the rough details of immediate business which he must discuss with Joseph the carpenter, he could forget that in his heart something lay dead. He turned up a little byway and saw ahead of him the white wall of Joseph's house, shared, he knew, by Mary, Joseph's affianced wife. Back of the dwelling was Joseph's shop, and to reach it he must enter the main living room and pass across the little courtyard. The sun was high in the heavens and in his eagerness to escape his own thoughts he had walked faster than he was aware, so that the sweat poured freely from his forehead as he reached the doorway. In the shadow of the little arch he stopped, wiped his face with his silken scarf, and opened his cloak to the breeze that blew weakly in the street.

Inside were voices, low and strangely solemn. Two people were speaking; there was a resonant yet reverent male voice and the answering voice of a woman. But even had he cared to eavesdrop, the voices were too hushed and low to carry distinctly through the rough wood of the door.

A MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

Slightly cooled and eager to plunge into the plans he must discuss with Joseph, he raised his hand to knock. But before his knuckles touched the door he paused; for the woman s voice had taken on a new quality, depth, vibrancy, fullness, and the words came to him with astonishing clearness.

"Behold," she was saying, "the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to thy word."

Then deep, unbroken silence.

Benjamin knocked. He heard the quiet movement of sandaled feet across the floor; the door opened gently and he looked into the interior.

He had expected to see an almost darkened room, for in the hot afternoons curtains would cover the windows. Yet, though his quick eye saw the curtains carefully drawn, he got the impression of a room recently filled with light, almost blazing with light, not the hot sunlight of Galilee, but another light that he felt rather than saw. It could hardly have anything to do with this young, simple woman standing before him, though he saw that her eyes glowed with the glory of another world and there seemed to be about her form a kind of fading radiance. His glance searched the room for the other voice. It was empty; and even as he looked, the light seemed to fade and cool shadows to replace it.

IMMORTALITY

"Madam," he said, "I came—" and stopped, not knowing why he felt himself going down upon his knees, while all about him was an air that was not of earth. It was as if a breath of heaven had blown through that room, a breath of God's great spirit dashing away the cobwebs that were doubts, the dusty shadows that were unbelief—as if angels had

stooped down and filled the room with supernatural perfume. And all the while the woman stood silently waiting for him to speak.

"Madam," he said, looking up at those eyes in which there still seemed a reflection of some heavenly vision, "my business with your husband can wait. But," he hurried on, "may I tell you, lady, that the Sadducee, for all his wisdom, is a fool?" He was talking to her, he suddenly realised, as if she knew of the Sadducee and his doubts and the clear, brutal arguments by which the Sadducee had slain his faith.

"Madam, there is a God who bends above his people; there is a supernatural that fills our very soul; there is an immortality and I shall live forever; and the Messiah will come to Israel."

As the last glimmer of the glory seemed to fade from the room, Benjamin felt it dawning with radiant splendour in his own soul.

MOTHER AND MADONNA

A Discontented Mother Learns Mother Love from the Mother of Christ

In the doorway of her house the little Egyptian mother sat and rocked her baby. The hot sun beat upon the white walls of the houses opposite and made the baby squint painfully; but in the shadow of the doorway it was almost cool except when the hot wind blew down the narrow street and brought with it a fierce blast from the desert.

The little mother leaned her head back against the doorjamb, weary and bored. Her rich olive skin, her wide, black, languid eyes, the softness of her parted lips, her listless weariness—all made her seem so very young. And when she lifted the heavy baby, it was with a strained effort. He was a heavy burden for her unaccustomed, slender arms

Down the street came the rattle of gay laughter, and the mother sat up expectantly. Her free hand arranged in quick repair the loosened hair that dangled against her cheek and the scarf that had been blowing loosely about her neck, as around the corner ran three girls, scarcely younger than herself, but flashing their white teeth and brilliant eyes in eager merriment.

As they reached the mother sitting in the doorway they stopped. The child in her arms, frightened at the sudden rush of strangers, set up a wail of terror, and the mother, hardly realising what she did, slapped him impulsively and looked up enviously at the three girls in their holiday dress.

THE TEMPLE FESTIVAL

"Come!" they cried, holding out their hands. "We dance this afternoon in the festival of Isis. Such flowers as fill the temple groves! Such bowls of red wine! Such throngs of people filling the temple! Such mad preparation for the procession!"

The mother, her mind whirling with a picture of gay festivals in the temple, listened eagerly, but again the baby in her arms wailed distressfully and she leaned back against the door jamb and shook her head.

"How can I?" she asked, her lips curling in contemptuous self -pity. "Can one dance with a baby in one's arms? The wail of a crying child is not the music to which one can time one's steps. Go, have your fun; I stay, held by these gripping fists to my doorway."

The girls hesitated a moment and then ran off, breathlessly eager for the festival in the temple of their goddess.

Into her lap the mother dropped her baby. With closed eyes she leaned back, heedless of the child who sobbed and kicked upon her knees, and dreamed as women have so often dreamed since girls first became mothers. She saw the bright procession winding through the mysterious columns of the temple, the white flying feet of the dancers, the bright gold of the tripods surmounted with a thin silver cloud of incense, the grave expression of the drummers and the uptilted line of trumpets, the flowers flung into the air, the frank admiration in the faces of the watching throng—all that she had loved until this child of hers had come to rob her of her youth and of her youth's gaiety.

TWO MOTHERS

She almost hated the squalling baby, hated his cries, the vigorous protest of his kicks, his impertinent little fists that sometimes struck her in their wild flaying. He had cost her all that gaiety and joy and life.

Between her closed eyes and the glare of the white wall opposite she felt the coming of a shadow. Frightened, she

looked up and saw standing before her a couple, the man, dignified and old, the woman just about her own age. Jews, she thought, and strangers. Then she noticed in the arms of the woman a sleeping baby not much older than her own.

The young Jewess, however, was not looking at her; she was looking at the babe squalling and protesting upon his mother's knee.

Ashamed, the Egyptian mother bent down and lifted the child against her heart.

"Hush," she hissed. "Hush, or the demons of the Nile will come to seize you!"

The venom of her tone worked the baby to new power of terror and grief, and his little body trembled with the storm that shook him. Suddenly the Jewish mother stooped forward and without a word laid her own sleeping child upon the knees of the Egyptian mother and took the wailing baby in her arms and laid it against her breast. She stood for a moment while the child, astonished at this transfer, held back his choked tears and throbbed with the suppressed rhythm of his sobs.

Then the Jewess sat in the doorway and leaned back against the opposite side and, rocking to and fro, broke into a soft lullaby. Back and forth her lithe young body swayed, as rhythmically graceful as that of the most skilled dancer, and her voice, low and infinitely tender, timed the lullaby to the rhythm of her movement.

IN MARY'S ARMS

'The baby in her arms regarded her with wide, speculative eyes. Then, as with the corner of her veil she wiped away the tears that glistened unheeded on his face, he smiled and cooed contentedly and settled down against her breast to sleep. And all the while, on the knees of the Egyptian woman, the Jewish baby slept, quietly, trustfully.

Gracefully the Jewish mother rose and held out to the Egyptian her now peacefully sleeping baby. The mother stretched out her arms as once more they exchanged children.

"Come, Mary," said the dignified man quietly. "We must reach the next village before the day is at its full. The heat would be hard on little Jesus."

The Jewish mother turned, her own baby sleeping against her shoulder, and with a last smile at the little Egyptian mother walked at the side of her husband down the dusty street.

But in the doorway the graceful body of the little Egyptian mother was swaying to and fro in a rhythm far more beautiful than any it had marked in temple processions, and her voice was singing a lullaby more sweetly than ever she had sung the hymns of Isis, and the newly awakened love was making tight the arms that clasped her sleeping child against her heart.

COURAGE TO LIVE

The Stranger Sees the King's Daughter and Hopes Again

A stranger in Nazareth walked dazed and unseeing through the heavy dust of the village road, among the tangle of goats and cartwheels, until he reached the village well. He was thirsty, so thirsty that his throat seemed cracked with the same dust that covered his sandaled feet and his bare, leather-strapped legs and stained his cloak with gray patches.

Yet he flung himself down at the well with a hopeless relaxation of body and made no move to draw water to quench that hot, throbbing thirst. When a man was going to die in a few moments, did it matter whether he died thirsty or refreshed with cool water?

His hand tightened reassuringly over the short Damascus sword that hung at his belt. There lay the one sure way to cure thirst—thirst or injustice or the bitterness of life or the cruelty of fate: lifting a man today and flinging him down broken and ruined tomorrow.

A CHEERFUL DONKEY DRIVER

The brisk rattle of cheerful bells made him look up almost into the face of a young donkey, gay tassels hanging from his bridle, and a rough hand on the leathern leading thong. Over the arched neck of the donkey suddenly appeared a brown, cheerful face that grinned at the man near the well.

"Your pardon, sir." said the donkey driver. "Just giving my donkey a drink."

The stranger shifted his position slightly as the donkey driver dipped a wooden bucket into the well.

“A thirsty day for man and beast,” he continued, and with fine democracy drank from the bucket himself, and then set it down before the donkey, who rattled his bells appreciatively and plunged his muzzle deep into the water.

“Stranger in these parts, aye?” queried the driver.

“Yes,” said the stranger.

“You don’t look any too cheerful.”

“Who would in this rotten world of ours?” The donkey driver considered this question philosophically; but the stranger, ready enough to pour out his pent-up anger and despair, hurried on.

“Why men go on living is beyond me. I for one am tired of it all, sick of the injustice that snatches a man’s wealth, flings away his money and leaves him to beg in the street; sets scoundrels above him and breaks him like a sapless twig.”

The donkey driver eyed the stranger’s purple-trimmed robe and the beautifully chased sword quizzically.

A QUEENLY MISSION

“You don’t look so badly off,” he ventured. “Mighty fine clothes you’re wearing, and that sword cost money.”

The stranger laughed ironically.

“Saved from the wreckage,” he said. “Donkeys and donkey drivers may go on living,” he added. “Thank the Fates, wise men end the futility and injustice of it all.”

The donkey driver shrugged his shoulders with fine indifference, and the stranger turned to leave. But as he took a step he suddenly stopped.

Up the dusty street, heavy earthen pitcher on her shoulder, came a woman. She was young. One could tell that from her light step and her slim graceful figure, even though her face was covered with a light veil. Her bare feet scarcely stirred the dust they trod upon, and though her garments were homespun and her arms devoid of jewellery, she had the walk of a goddess or a queen.

“Who is that?” asked the stranger.

The driver looked over his shoulder.

“Her? She’s Mary of Nazareth, wife of Joseph the carpenter.”

The woman reached the well, flung back her soft veil in a gesture that had in it all the poetry of motion. The stranger stood, caught by the loveliness of her face. She stooped, dipped her pitcher and then lifted its heavy weight slowly to her shoulder. Again her veil dropped, and now, burdened by the heavy pitcher, she moved slowly, almost staggering under the weight she carried.

“A village woman?” asked the stranger incredulously.

THE DAUGHTER OF DAVID

“A daughter of David the king,” explained the driver. “The family used to be rich—servants and money and a grand house. But nothing much left. Joseph, the man she just married, is a poor tradesman with a poor business. He will give her mighty little, I’m telling you, of luxury. But nobody ever hears her complain or fuss or bewail her fate. You saw her face, calm and contented and peaceful. Seems mighty unfair and unjust, though, that a daughter of David should carry a pitcher of water from the village well. Unjust, but she’s got the pluck to do it. Brave, I’d say.”

He wheeled his donkey in a cloud of dust and to the jangling of the donkey’s bells moved whistling down the dusty street. The stranger stood at the well, his hands still clasping the hilt of his sword. Injustice? The daughter of David carrying water from the well, her young body bent under its weight. And calm, contented, uncomplaining, while he—

Swiftly he slipped the sword from his belt, and it dropped with a clean-cut splash into the well. Then, squaring his shoulders, he went his way, his head high, the line of courage set in his jaw.

THE SLAVE

The Roman Finds a Captive and the Captive Finds a Protectress

Lucius read the letter carefully. It was so typical of his cynical old uncle—a humorous Roman, but a scamp if one ever lived. Sometimes one’s better instincts resented his heartless cynicism, his frank, unblushing profligacy, but as he

turned a witty apology for himself, one forgot one's resentment in the roar of laughter that acknowledged his cleverness.

"Lucius, my son," he wrote, using, the young man noticed, the best parchment and not the common wax slates, "the slaves I send you are a bit of Roman civilisation to console you in the midst of your Jewish exile. They cost me a pretty penny; so use them well. The Gothic barbarian is strong enough to serve as porter or bully: the Greek is a skilled secretary, who will write your letters or dress your hair with equal skill; and the girl—- Oh, Lucius, my generous heart alone makes me send her to you when my artistic nature bids me place her as a fair adornment in my own dwelling. Think of your old uncle affectionately. Hail and farewell."

Lucius looked up at the messenger who had delivered the parchment.

"Where have you kept the slaves?" he asked.

The messenger touched his banded forehead respectfully. "At the exchange of Synesius the Persian. He awaits your acceptance. We brought them carefully from Rome to Jerusalem by the best boats and the smoothest wheels. Your uncle bade us commit them to you in perfect condition."

"We shall see them," said Lucius, rising and flinging his heavy cloak over his shoulders.

It was like his rascally old uncle to remember him in his Jewish diplomatic exile. The Goth he could use as a sort of bodyguard. Romans needed bodyguards when the mad Galileans ran the streets. The Greek would fit into a dozen places, for these Greeks were clever, useful chaps. But the girl—

A DISTURBING GIFT

How like his uncle to send him a girl slave. Lucius knitted his brow. He rather prided himself he had kept the stern old ways of early Roman times, not the easy, soft fashions of his contemporaries. Still everyone had his slaves nowadays, and girl slaves were fashionable in Rome. So he shrugged his shoulders. One might as well accept the standards of one's times.

The exchange of Synesius the Persian welcomed in its capacious sheds the produce of the world. Lucius followed the messenger as he wound in and out among the bales and boxes, cages of animals, bunches of fruit hanging up to complete the ripening process, through the thousand smells of spices, sandalwood, and human sweat, until he came into a small room, rough, yet fitted for human occupancy. There, under the eyes of the slave master, sat the silent, hairy Goth, the Greek, sly and suave and spotlessly clean in spite of the long journey, and the girl, crouched at the foot of a column, her eyes closed wearily.

Lucius appraised the Goth and the Greek quickly and with a satisfied glance. Before the girl he stood uncomfortably abashed. She had the long blonde hair of a northern tribeswoman, bound loosely with silk bands about her exquisitely carved face. He had seen just such a delicate face on the carved finger ring of Augustus. Her long linen robe, bound about her slender hips with a sash of scarlet, showed, in splashes of mud and streaks of dust, signs of a rough journey. Her feet, soiled from the road, were shod in sandals, one strap of which was torn loose.

"She wouldn't dress in the fine garments we brought her." apologised the messenger. "I am sorry."

THE LOVELY GIRL

The girl, as Lucius and the messenger stood before her, rose unsteadily. Then, with a brief effort at defiance, she lifted her chin. Lucius regarded her from under puzzled brows. That scamp of an uncle was complicating his life; for the girl fitted badly into his stern ancient-Roman theories. She was quite too young, too beautiful. Still—

"Come," Lucius said to the messenger. "We shall go with them back to my house."

The great, burly Goth lumbered, the Greek minced, the girl walked with nervously painful self-control through the litter of the warehouse and out into the street

Lucius unconsciously walked more slowly than usual for he was thinking hard, thinking altogether of the girl passed by a profligate uncle into his hands. So engrossed was he that he paid no attention to the woman coming in his direction down the street.

But the slave girl noticed the look of mingled pity and anger that changed the expression of the woman s calm face, noticed, too, the protecting folds of the blue cloak that fell over her queenly shoulders, saw the instinctive pity that

sent her motherly arms outstretched protectingly and unhesitatingly she ran from the dreadful procession of which she was a part and flung herself on her knees before the woman.

Lucius stopped, roused from his dreaming by the quickness of this move. He saw the messenger stride across and lay his rough hands on the shoulders of the girl. But as the man touched her, the fingers of the woman closed gently on his wrist and her other arm pressed the trembling shoulders of the girl tight against her. Hesitating the messenger stood and looked over his shoulder at the Roman.

UNDER A BLUE ROBE

Lucius walked toward the group frozen to immobility in the midst of the street. The girl crouched in the dust against the robe of the woman, the messenger leaning forward waiting for orders. As Lucius reached the group the woman, with a protecting graciousness, flung about the girl her own blue robe.

"Madam," said the Roman courteously, "the girl is my slave."

The woman did not move. Steadily she regarded Lucius, with a gaze so calm, so reproachful, so authoritative that, his eyes involuntarily dropped and rested on the white face of the girl, about whose head the blue cloak hung as if it were a veil. Gone was the defiance with which she had faced him; gone the look of terror, which he had not seen but which had accompanied the first brave steps from the warehouse. Instead there was a look of utter confidence; she had found her protectress, and now she was safe.

THE BILL OF FREEDOM

Quickly Lucius slipped from his girdle the purse he carried. He held it out toward the girl, but she shrank back from him into the closer shadow of her protectress. Lucius turned his glance from the girl to the woman and saw that she had never lost her look of reproach, sorrow, and quiet authority.

"Madam," he said, "she is under your protection. Here is the money she will need for her future. Today I shall send the bill of freedom to your home. She may thank you, for you have set her free."

The woman bowed her acknowledgment and the girl's face lighted with wild joy. She was like a captive bird that suddenly felt her captor's fingers opening to let her go.

"To whom," asked Lucius, "shall I send the bill of freedom?"

"To Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth," answered the woman.

Lucius, with something of the air of the splendid Romans of ancient days, bowed, lifted his hand as he would in saluting the empress, and strode behind his men slaves down the street.

FOR THE WIDOWED MOTHER

Mary Gives Her Blessing When Jesus Is Far Away

Over the bed the tall Jewish physician bent in silent, worried study. The boy lying there under the oriental canopy tossed restlessly; his eyes were closed, his fists clenched, and his cheeks were mottled with fever.

The physician raised his head and pulled at his heavy beard. Then he faced the expectant gathering around the bedside, but he looked past the villagers of friendly Nazareth, who had poured in to be with the widow in her grief, and fixed his look upon the agonised mother.

"What hope?" she asked, catching the hem of his long robe in a nervous clutch.

"Jehovah is good," the physician said gently. "Your son is beyond my power; we must leave him to the All--Powerful."

These words, the mother knew, were a death sentence and she fell back faintly into the arms of her friends, while a murmur of sympathy ran through the group. An only son, a widowed mother, and Galilee's most skilful physician powerless to help!

"SAVE MY BOY"

As the wave of despair swept over the crowd and the low wail that preceded the awful mourning for the dead rose involuntarily from hysterical lips, the curtain of the little bedroom was lifted and a tall, calm woman stood framed in

the doorway. Whether it came from the raised curtain or from the figure of the woman, a sudden glow of light seemed to fill the room, The mother raised her head to look at the quiet, dignified woman standing there regarding her dying son with pitying eyes. Swiftly the mother leaped to her feet and, ruthlessly pushing the crowd aside, ran and flung herself on her knees before the woman in the doorway.

"Mary," she cried, "you can save my boy. Your son, they say, is doing wonderful things in Judea. At Naim he raised the dead son of a widowed mother. Beg him to save my boy."

Mary placed her slim white hand on the head of the distracted mother and a pitying murmur ran through the crowd; for the request was one that only a woman quite out of her senses would have made. Jesus, they knew, was in far-off Jerusalem, and the swiftest horseman, riding day and night, could not take word to Him, much less bring Him back before the boy was dead and laid in the tomb. Yet, under the hand of Mary, the distracted mother grew suddenly quiet. It was as if the calm that permeated the gentle Mary had gone out from her and stilled the tempest raging in the mother's breast. She rose from her knees and, taking Mary's hand, led her to the bedside of the boy.

MARY'S PRAYER

"Bless him," whispered the mother. "I had forgotten your son is too far away to help him; but bless him for me."

Mary's look of compassion seemed to wrap round mother and son. Then she dropped the clinging fingers of the mother, closed her eyes, and clasped her hands as if in prayer. Over the room came the hush of fixed attention as they knelt or stood or sat watching the tall, beautiful woman at the bedside pray for the dying boy. Was she praying, they wondered, to that Father in Heaven of whom her son preached and for whom he laboured? Too bad, they felt, that across the distance she could not ask her son for a miracle of his healing. Slowly Mary opened her eyes, smiled down upon the delirious boy, touched his hot forehead tenderly, and then, putting her hands on the shoulders of the mother, kissed her on the cheeks. Then through the hushed crowd she moved silently from the room.

THE SON RESTORED

A sense of disappointment gripped the spectators. Any of them could have done as much. They moved restlessly, and again the shrill preliminary cry of mourning broke from a woman's lips.

But suddenly the watching mother sprang forward, flung wide her arms, and stood exultant above the bed. Her boy slowly opened his eyes. The hot flush of the fever faded into the normal pallour of health, and his arms, long weak and helpless, stretched out as he uttered "Mother!"

In a swift enveloping embrace the mother caught her son, and above the sound of her happy weeping the murmur of the crowd grew into an exultant shout.

"He lives! A miracle!"

But as Mary walked down the street toward her own little house, her heart was saying its prayer of gratitude to her far-away Son.

THE PERFECT STATUE

The Artist Sees Beauty That Cannot Be Embodied in Marble

"For a temporary studio, my friend, you have done extremely well."

Philander bowed in acknowledgment of the compliment and then regarded his studio complacently. On the wall hung rich tapestries that fairly cried aloud in the joy of their colouring. Bits of hammered metal were everywhere, a drinking cup that looked as if it once held the Greek sacrificial wine, a bell that some daring sailor had stolen from a Chinese priest, a sword on the blade of which were graven Greeks warring with Trojans. And everywhere stood ivory and marble statues, some as old as the first chisel, some the latest work of the newest artist. It was beautiful, he felt, and it amused him to think that in art-hating Jerusalem he had filled his room with statues that would have caused a Pharisee to cry out against idolatry.

"Yes," he agreed, smiling at his delighted visitor, "I knew that one could find priceless things here in the Orient if one had an eye for them. And I was right. For a few pieces of silver I have gathered all this wealth to carry back with me when next week I leave for Corinth."

PHILANDER'S MASTERPIECE

"But you are an artist, not a collector," his friend protested. "Let lesser men gather art while you create it."

Philander's eyes snapped.

"Do you fancy that my hands could have been idle?" Across the deep fur rugs he moved to a corner of the studio where the light from the opening in the roof poured down, tempered only by the filter of thin silk curtains. Philander caught the silken drapes that hung before this corner, and turned to address his friend:

"Would you be surprised," he said, with unconcealed amusement, "if I told you that here in inartistic Jerusalem I had made my masterpiece?"

His guest sat forward in his chair taut with excitement "Yet I am certain that I have," Philander hurried on. "Here in a land without goddesses I dreamed of one, and she has leapt full-grown from my fingers. Day after day as I haunted the markets I have watched these orient women, catching the line of nose and head, the curve of eyelashes, the bow of a woman's back as she bent to lift a burden, the soft roundness of the arm and shoulder of slave girl carrying her water jar. And from all this I have made my goddess, perfect among women, waiting only for the breath of life to draw Jove from high Olympus. Would you like to see her?"

THE ARTIST'S OATH

Without waiting for the inevitable answer, he pulled the curtain rope. His friend leaped to his feet and then, as if hypnotised, walked slowly toward the suddenly revealed statue.

Just less than human size, the white figure of the statue glowed like snow against the background of purple silk.

"Zeus!" cried his guest, in a hushed voice. "What a goddess! I could almost kneel and worship."

"Men shall worship her," laughed Philander. "My goddess will find her way into some columned temple, and men will kneel before her with solemn rite and priestly cult, with poured-out wine and religious procession, worshipping her as the perfection of womankind, the gods' dream of a woman for the first time made visible."

"If there only were such a woman!" cried his guest.

"Friend," answered Philander, laying his hand upon his friend's arm, "I am so sure that in all the world there is no woman half so lovely that I have sworn a strange oath. If ever I see a woman who makes me ashamed of my goddess, who outshines her, out-beauties her, I have sworn before Olympus that with the very mallet that fashioned her I will smash my goddess to bits."

"With that for your oath," answered the friend, "your goddess is immortal."

* * *

Philander entered his studio and sank upon a cushioned seat. It had been his custom since his statue was finished to run, as soon as he entered the studio, and lift the curtains and pay his goddess homage. But now he sat upon the stool near the farthest wall, his hands clasped tensely, and gazed off into space. For long moments he remained motionless. Then he arose, crossed the room, drew back the blind that covered the opening in the roof through which light flooded his studio, and then hastily flung back the curtains before his goddess.

UGLINESS

Only the last glimmer of twilight crept in through the opening in the roof; yet even in the shadows his statue gleamed with a whiteness of ivory against the purple of its silken hangings.

From the wall he caught a torch, lighted it from the tiny spark that his slave kept burning near the door, and held it close to his goddess.

Could this statue really be his? His lip curled contemptuously as he regarded it. The coarse voluptuousness of those arms and legs! And he had thought them beautiful! He almost laughed aloud as he measured the lustful curve of those too full lips, the fleshy heaviness that made his goddess seem rooted to the very earth. He held the torch close to her face and the flame lit up the sensuous fullness of her chin and the full, shameless lines of her figure.

THE GODDESS DIES

"I have sworn," he said bitterly, and thrust back the torch into its holder, where it sputtered and threw uncertain beams around the goddess.

Philander, his hand upon his heart, bowed in a ironical reverence.

“Farewell, my goddess,” he said. “The unkind Fates have decreed that no one shall bend before thee, no priestly cult pronounce thee immortal; for thou hast lost thy right to life, and I who made thee now destroy thee. Today, my goddess, in the streets of Jerusalem I saw Mary the mother of Jesus smile upon her Son.’’

And the mallet, with crashing force, fell upon the cold, soulless head.

MAD SUZANNA

Her Infant Dies for Christ

They called her Mad Suzanna; and though they dreaded her and avoided her, no one but felt that she had reason for her madness. From village to village she went, from her native Bethlehem out into the hill countries, up to Galilee and back to Jerusalem, and everywhere she told her story to anyone who would listen.

“Oh,” she cried, in pathetic monotony, “he was the sweetest babe that ever a mother bore. Still against my breast I feel the warm touch of his baby fingers. When I sat beneath the fig tree and rocked him in my arms, the queen upon her throne was not as rich as I nor half so happy—I whose husband had died without seeing his own child.

THE CRASH OF SOLDIERY

“And then,” she would hurry on, in quickly growing emotion, “one night as I stood by his crib, not daring to loosen his fingers clinging to mine, for fear I would waked him, came the terrible beat of sword hilts against my door, the curses of soldiers, and the roar of their savage laughter.

I caught my baby from his crib as Herod’s men flung down the door and stood there, the lamplight striking lightning from their swords. And though I fought them madly, they snatched my child and buried their swords in his little heart.”

And then her eyes would grow shrewdly vindictive.

“And why? Did Herod hate my child? Not mine. He slew my child to be sure he would kill the new-born Christ. Yet they say he missed the Christ, that somewhere in this world the Christ still lives. Not one snap do I care for Him, this Christ. But when I find His mother, I will make her suffer as I have suffered. And I will search until I find her.”

One day, as she wandered in Galilee, she heard of Jesus and His mother Mary and how He preached in Jerusalem, and how Mary often followed Him from afar, and of a chamber above the city streets where sometimes He dwelt and Mary came to visit Him.

She almost flew down the road. After days and nights of tireless walking she came to a strangely quiet, terror-silenced Jerusalem over which cracked great whips of lightning. But neither the fear in the eyes of the citizens nor the startled air with which they crept about in the shadows, nor the fierceness of the storm meant anything to Mad Suzanna. She was proceeding straight to the little room over the street where perhaps she could find thy mother of Him for whose sake her child had been slain.

VENGEANCE AT LAST

Mad Suzanna found the little tortuous street, found the house, and with bare fists pounded savagely upon the door. With difficulty she controlled her laughter. Now she could face the mother of this Christ and tell her, with all the carefully planned fury of her revenge, what she suffered when her innocent child had died to save Mary’s guilty one!

Down the stair she heard the sound of slow, cautious feet, and the door was opened timidly. A flash of lightning illuminated the grief-torn face of a young man.

“Whom do you seek?” he whispered.

“Mary, the mother of Jesus,” she said, controlling her voice as well as she could.

The young man swung open the door, allowed her to enter, fastened it again with a heavy iron bar, and then preceded Mad Suzanna up the stairs.

A low light burned in the upper room, a light that was hardly needed because of the blinding flashes of lightning that followed in such quick succession. Near a rough table sat a woman, her head bowed, her hands clasped against her knees so that the skin was white over her knuckles.

“Mary?” Mad Suzanna asked the youth.

“Yes,” he said.

THE CROSSES

Then Suzanna, circling about like a wild beast bearing down upon its prey, moved round the table and stood before Mary. Mary lifted her head slightly and pushed back her veil. But the woman was too keen upon her revenge to note that grief had ravaged Mary’s face and torn it with fierce claws. Out of the long years of waiting swept the fury of the woman’s words. Mary sat regarding her with patient, hurt eyes, while over her poured the wild abuse the railing, the curses of Mad Suzanna. Once the young man moved forward protesting, but Mary’s hand, slightly raised, stayed him halfway.

“And,” screamed Mad Suzanna, in a fierce climax, “my child, my son, my innocent one died, was slain—do you hear me?—to save your son. My son for yours!”

Quietly Mary rose from the table and put her hand upon the trembling, exhausted shoulder of Mad Suzanna; gently she guided her to the window, and the woman, awed by Mary’s quiet power, moved without protest. A sudden succession of terrifying flashes filled the sky. Mary lifted her arms and pointed off toward a distant hill.

Against the sky stood three crosses, one tall and upright, the others bent and swaying. Mary’s hand tightened on the shoulder of Mad Suzanna as with tearless voice she said: “Then tonight, Suzanna, we are quits. For look—my son, my boy, my innocent one, today has been slain for you and yours.”

And the madness dying from her eyes, Suzanna sank upon her knees and kissed the robe of Mary.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

“Some Day My Son Will Come Home”

The house was so lonely and empty and almost terrifying. The old mother walked about her little home touching each dear, familiar object with fingers that seemed to caress them. Her son had sat at that table, precisely there, where the evening light fell over his shoulder as he ate. He had hung his cloak there on the wooden peg near the door. On that couch he had reclined when he returned from his work, kicking off his sandals and luxuriating in the delicious smells that came from the hearth, where she bent over the pots steaming with his favourite foods.

And now her son was gone. Miles of ocean separated them—long, treacherous miles marked by a thousand unknown dangers. Why had he, a Jew of Galilee, felt the call of the sea and left her thus? If he must sail, there was the Lake of Tiberias, not the terrible, stormy ocean which battered even the stoutest Roman ships to broken splinters. Some remote Phoenician strain had sent him thus away from her, some strain that clamoured for the wild, whipping winds and the fierce surge of mid-ocean.

THE TALE OF DESOLATION

She sank desolate on the couch, silent in the midst of her silent house. It might be years, she felt, before again she heard his cheerful whistle from the dusty road or felt his strong arms about her aging shoulders.

“Good God! Why must mothers bear sons and then see them snatched away to leave the mother’s heart and the mother’s home so empty?”

The woman rose and stood in the open doorway. Across the road was the tiny house of Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom some had thought the Christ. The old lady watched a dim figure moving about in the twilight, scarcely visible as the deep oriental night fell over the village. Then a flicker of light in the casement and the figure of Mary bent to mend the flame.

Moved by that uncontrollable desire to talk to someone, the old mother threw her scarf about her head and, leaving her door ajar, ran across the road, knocked, and pushed past the quiet gray-haired Mary, who welcomed her with silent understanding.

The torrent of her mother’s loneliness poured forth the tale of lonely meals once shared by a vigorous son; of a clean, warm bed no longer mussed by tossing limbs but orderly as the covering of a bier; of a home that used to echo to manly laughter and hearty jest, now the abode of unbroken, terrifying silence; of a house that had seemed so small

when he was in it and now seemed so vast when he was gone; of the frightening evening hours when she waited for the homecoming step that she knew she would not hear.

THE PLACE AT TABLE

Mary smiled at her gently, understanding the depth of her loneliness.

The mother ended her tale and looked up with tear-misted eyes at Mary. Mary rose, lifted the flickering lamp from the table and, taking the mother by the hand, walked quietly with her through the little house of Nazareth.

Just for a moment she paused at the dining table. Here, I though now she lived alone, for John was gone on the work of the apostolate, were two places set, one with its well- used metal plate, its heavy drinking cup, its strong masculine knife and spoon—the place where once Jesus had sat, who now had left her for His Father's side.

Reverently she lifted the curtains of the little alcove behind which was a cot spread with fresh, clean linen and warm with hand-made rugs tucked in so carefully. Mary's hand touched caressingly the pillow where His head had rested and would never rest again.

There in the corner near the door hung a cloak, old now and faded with the passing years, but as carefully brushed as if it might again be snatched up and worn by Him as it had been on that memorable day when He left her to start His ministry; and beneath it stood the sandals that had once encased His tireless, eager feet.

AS HE LEFT THEM

Hand in hand the mothers walked to the door at the rear of the house and across the courtyard into the little shop that had been Joseph's before it became Jesus'. No shavings nor bits of clean wood nor fresh debris of a busy shop now lay about the floor; but on the tables lay His tools, as polished as though they had been used just that afternoon, waiting, hammer and saw, awl and plane, for the hands that had once gripped them so efficiently and now would never touch them again.

Then, as they entered the living room, Mary went to the window and once more trimmed her flickering lamp, as if it were a welcome light to lead His feet out of the darkness into the light, warmth, and love that filled her home.

And in the silence of that empty house, which once had been filled with the sound of His beloved voice, the mothers looked at each other and understood.

It was the mother of the sailor who spoke.

"I was unkind and selfish," she said. "At least some day my son will come home."

THE JOY OF DEATH

Joel the Merchant Seeks the Meaning of Death.

"When a man is as rich as you are, he can afford to gratify whims of this sort," said one of the strange assembly in the luxurious Judean reception hall.

"Perhaps it is because I am rich that I do not consider it a whim to bring together wise men who can tell me the meaning of death."

Joel the Merchant looked around at the men who had come, at the bidding of his riches, to give him counsel.

"You have done well," he said, bowing approvingly to his secretary. That faithful servant, remembering the struggle it had been to gather the world's wisest men for his rich patron, breathed a relieved sigh.

HOW CAN I CEASE TO FEAR?

"You represent, I am told," continued Joel, "the greatest wisdom of the world. I know that it has been hard for you to come from your distant lands to talk with me on death, but I shall make it worth your while."

A black slave placed upon the table two significantly heavy bags of gold. "You see," Joel went on, "I have everything that man could ask. Yet I fear death, fear it with a craven dread. So I ask you, out of your great wisdom, to tell me if death has some meaning that I could understand and be in fear no longer. Tell me, What is death?"

The venerable men stirred uneasily.

Finally the dapper little Roman leaned forward and Joel, turned to him expectantly.

“To us Romans,” he began, “death is the terrible shadow, in contrast with which the colour and brightness of the world grow more beautiful. It is the ghost that drives us into the perfumed arms of living loves. Death is the thief who takes everything from all of us, and, because he reaches out for every living man, makes us all cherish life, love life, enjoy life, more completely.”

Joel bowed. “I am not fond of shadows,” he said. “Nor do I love ghosts or willingly consort with thieves.”

“Death,” said the Hindoo, in a curiously sing-song voice, “is the flight of stairs upward from landing to landing if you be noble; downward into the depths if you be vile. Then, at length, after long centuries of climbing or descending, you step from the ladder into the great well that is the All-Spirit and you are so absorbed so that you cease to be yourself and you become part of one divine.”

“My thanks,” Joel said. “I do not think I care either to climb or descend, nor do I think that your All-Spirit would be any recompense for the loss of my beloved self.”

WHAT’S DEATH TO A JEW?

“Death,” said the Greek, “was called by the ancients the river flowing to the Elysian Fields.”

“And are souls contented in the Elysian Fields?” asked Joel sceptically.

“‘I had rather be a slave of some miserable farmer’, said the ghost of Achilles, walking in the Elysian Fields, ‘than the ruler of all the Lands of the Dead,’” answered the Greek.

Joel turned with a shrug from the Greek and fixed his eyes upon the great Pharisee standing disdainfully aloof, feeling himself sullied by the presence of the pagans.

“And what is death to a Jew?” asked Joel.

“What concern is it of yours,” answered the Pharisee insolently, “what death may mean to a Jewish believer? For you it will be the moment when you face a vengeful Jehovah who will smite you with a terrible blow of His angry hand.”

Joel lifted his hands in a gesture of dismissal.

“You have been kind,” he said to them. Then, with a disrespectful shrug, he motioned to his slave. “But I fear you have made your journeys in vain. My treasurer will strive to reward you.”

And he turned from the room.

After him, in pattering sandals, came his secretary.

“Master,” he said, “there was to have been one more, John, a disciple of this Jesus whom the Jews crucified, but for some reason he did not come.”

Joel looked interested.

“In that case,” he said, ‘take me to him.”

THE LITTLE DARKENED ROOM

There was about the little house where John dwelt an indefinable air of hushed solemnity, and the secretary, who had walked a step in advance of his master, hesitated before he knocked. There was a pause and the door was opened by John, who regarded the visitors questioningly.

“You failed of your appointment,” the secretary explained, “to tell my master, Joel the Merchant, what death means to one who follows Christ.”

“I have been too close to death,” John answered, “to talk of its meaning.” He opened the door wide. “Come,” he invited. “I shall let you see what death means to one who loved Christ.”

They followed him into the little darkened room and stopped abashed. A quick breath seemed to catch Joel’s throat as he leaned forward eagerly.

Upon a white couch lay the quiet figure of a woman, past middle age, and, though her hair was touched with grey, her skin was unwrinkled and unmarked by the fingers of time. Her white hands folded above a lily; under her feet and under her head were pillows of white roses; on her face was an expression such as Joel had never seen on any other face, living or dead. It was as if she had looked upon some joy too great to bear and had died of sheer happiness.

“Who is this?” he asked breathlessly.

“The mother of Christ.”

“And what did death mean to her?”

“What it means to all who love Christ—the end of waiting for the welcoming arms of God.”

All that night Joel paced the floor of his room. He could not forget that fixed smile of perfect happiness, that unfading expression of joy beyond the joys of earth that had come to her only with death. Then death must be a beautiful thing, a lovely thing, except for the fact—

As he stood before the polished steel of his mirror and studied the familiar lines of his face, flexed the muscles of his arms, and strode to and fro on his strong, vigorous legs, Joel was conscious of that uncontrollable affection which binds a man to his body.

Before sundown, he pondered, they had lowered the lovely body of that woman into the grave. And though the spirit that had carved the beauty of that dead face would live, her flesh would rot into forgotten dust. Death was too terrible if it robbed her thus.

At his bidding his slave had followed the funeral procession of the dead Mary, to discover the place of her burial. Now, as the first rays of the sun struck fire from the domes of the Temple, one of the slaves came to lead him to the newly made grave. He felt that he must stand above that grave, morbidly knowing that her flesh was rotting and her loveliness turning to filth under the cruel alchemy of death.

RESURRECTION

He and his slave crossed the quiet city and came to the tombs outside the walls. Scattered white rose petals marked the path of her funeral procession and, shuddering as he always shuddered at the nearness of death, he came in the footsteps of his slave, to the fresh grave. But suddenly the slave stopped, screamed once in terror, and turning, ran headlong back by the path by which he had come.

Joel hesitated and then pushed forward and stood, not beside a mound of earth, but above an open grave filled with lilies that flung into the air a perfume unlike that of any lilies he had ever smelled.

Puzzled, Joel looked into the grave that was a garden, and then, at the sound of running feet, he turned and saw John at his side. John, too, looked into the grave.

“Death,” he cried, “is the prelude to resurrection.”

Joel knelt in the dewy grass. “I am content. Teach me to know and love Christ.”

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