Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Bethlehem’s Children

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

his body, and he gripped his spear hard, as if he sought support.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the soldier—who all the while hoped he would soon live through new wars and longed, through daring feats, to raise himself to power and riches—felt so

exasperated with the little three-year-old that he raised his spear threateningly the next time the child ran past.

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



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

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

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

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

On the way his heavy blond curls had tumbled down over his forehead and eyes. He shook his head several times to get the hair out of his eyes, so that he could look up. When he succeeded at last, and became conscious of the hard expression on the soldier's face, he was not frightened, but stood still and

begged him, with a bewitching smile, to taste of the water which he had brought with him. But the soldier felt no desire to accept a kindness from the child, whom he regarded as his enemy. He did not look down into his pretty face, but stood rigid and immovable, and showed no sign that he understood what the child wished to do for him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the Commander had gone and the soldier once more stood alone at his post, he looked around for the child. The little one played all the while among

the flowers, and the soldier caught himself thinking that the boy swayed above them as light and attractive as a butterfly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Along the farthest wall of the gallery, and almost hidden by flower-garlands and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then—as though this had been an unheard-of crime—all at once these iron-men

set themselves in motion. With indescribable fury they threw themselves upon the children, and seized them! Some swung them over their heads, like missiles, and flung them between lamps and garlands over the balustrade and down to the court, where they were killed the instant they struck the stone pavement. Others drew their swords and pierced the children's hearts; others, again, crushed their heads against the walls before they threw them down into the dark courtyard.

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

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

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

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

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

The woman came toward the soldier with such speed that she appeared to be flying, and he didn't have time to distinguish the features of either the woman or her child. He only pointed his sword at them, and the woman, with the child in

her arms, dashed against it. He expected that the next second both she and the child would fall to the ground pierced through and through.

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

But the little bee had done its work very well.

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

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

"By my sword!" said the soldier, as he stood and stared down the narrow street which led toward the gate, "I believe Voltigius has made a stupid blunder. It would have been better had he kept the gates closed and ordered a thorough search of every house in the city, until he had found the boy who managed to escape from the feast. Voltigius expects that his parents will try to get him away from here as soon as they learn that the gates are open. I fear this is not a wise calculation. How easily they could conceal a child!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The soldier quietly lowered the spear and stepped aside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He felt despondent, like one who believes he is struggling against some superior power. He asked himself if it might not be possible that the gods protected these people against him.

“This trouble is in vain. Let me turn back before I perish from hunger and thirst in this barren land!” he said to himself, again and again. Then he was seized

with fear of that which awaited him on his home-coming, should he turn back without having accomplished his mission.

Twice he had permitted the child to escape, and neither Voltigius nor Herod would pardon him for anything of the kind.

“As long as Herod knows that one of the Bethlehem children still lives, he will always be haunted by the same anxiety and dread,” said the soldier. “Most likely he will try to ease his worries by nailing me to a cross.”

It was a hot noonday hour, and he suffered tortures from the ride through this mountain district on a road which wound around steep cliffs where no breeze stirred. Both horse and rider were ready to drop.

Several hours before he had lost every trace of the fugitives, and he felt more disheartened than ever.

“I must give it up,” thought he. “I verily believe it is time wasted to pursue them further. They must perish anyway in this awful wilderness.”

As he thought this, he discovered, in a mountain-wall near the roadside, the vaulted entrance to a grotto.

Immediately he rode up to the opening. “I will rest a while in this cool mountain cave,” thought he. “Then, mayhap, I can continue the pursuit with renewed strength.”

As he was about to enter, he was struck with amazement! On each side of the opening grew a beautiful lily. The two stalks stood there tall and erect and full of blossoms. They sent forth an intoxicating odor of honey, and many bees buzzed around them.

It was such an uncommon sight in this wilderness that the soldier did something extraordinary. He broke off a large white flower and took it with him into the cave.

The cave was neither deep nor dark, and as soon as he entered he saw that there were already three travelers within: a man, a woman, and a child, who lay stretched out upon the ground, lost in deep slumber.

The soldier had never before felt his heart beat as it did at this vision. They were the three runaways whom he had hunted so long. He recognized them instantly. And here they lay sleeping, unable to defend themselves and wholly in his power.

He drew his sword quickly and bent over the sleeping child.

Cautiously he lowered the sword toward the infant’s heart, and measured carefully, in order to kill with a single thrust.

He paused an instant to look at the child’s countenance. Now, when he was certain of victory, he felt a grim pleasure in beholding his victim.

But when he saw the child his joy increased, for he recognized the little boy whom he had seen play with bees and lilies in the meadow beyond the city gate.

“Why, of course I should have understood this all the time!” thought he. “This is why I have always hated the child. This is the pretended Prince of Peace.”

He lowered his sword again while he thought: “When I lay this child’s head at Herod’s feet, he will make me Commander of his Life Guard.”

As he brought the point of the sword nearer and nearer the heart of the sleeping child, he reveled in the thought: “This time, at least, no one shall come between us and snatch him from my power.”

But the soldier still held in his hand the lily which he had broken off at the grotto entrance; and while he was thinking of his good fortune, a bee that had been hidden in its chalice flew towards him and buzzed around his head.

He staggered back. Suddenly he remembered the bees which the boy had carried to their home, and he remembered that it was a bee that had helped the child escape from Herod’s feast. This thought struck him with surprise. He held the sword suspended, and stood still and listened for the bee.

Now he did not hear the tiny creature’s buzzing. As he stood there, perfectly still, he became conscious of the strong, delicious perfume which came from the lily that he held in his hand.

Then he began to think of the lilies that the little one had saved; he remembered that it was a cluster of lilies that had hidden the child from his view and made possible the escape through the city gate.

He became more and more thoughtful, and he drew back the sword.

“The bees and the lilies have requited his good deeds,” he whispered to himself. Then he was struck by the thought that the little one had once shown even him a kindness, and a deep crimson flush mounted to his brow.

“Can a Roman soldier forget to requite an accepted service?” he whispered.

He fought a short battle with himself. He thought of Herod, and of his own desire to destroy the young Peace-Prince.

“It does not become me to murder this child who has saved my life,” he said, at last.

And he bent down and laid his sword beside the child, that the fugitives on awakening should understand the danger they had escaped.

Then he saw that the child was awake. He lay and regarded the soldier with the beautiful eyes which shone like stars.

And the warrior bent a knee before the child.

“Lord, *thou* art the Mighty One!” said he. “Thou art the strong Conqueror! Thou art He whom the gods love! Thou art He who shall tread upon adders and scorpions!”

He kissed his feet and stole softly out from the grotto, while the little one smiled and smiled after him with great, astonished child-eyes.

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