

ROSES OF BETHANY

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Matt. 26:6-13

Mark 15:42-46

The last week of Jesus of Nazareth was marked by paradoxes: joyous surprises, bitter disappointments. Curious contrasts waited one upon another. Vicissitudes strangely unlike followed hard and fast. Lights and shadows intermingled. It was an holy week, yet marred by unholy episodes.

A striking paradox of that week was the Kiss of Judas and the Deed of Pilate's Wife. One of Jesus' disciples bargained with His enemies to deliver Him into their hands and sealed the sordid business with a kiss. Such conduct is difficult to understand, much more so to explain. There is something serpentine about a traitor, something devilish about treason. Who can doubt but that the betrayal at the hands of Judas was a more painful ordeal for Jesus than the spitting in His face, the base mockery by Herod's soldiers or the indecent choice of Barabbas by the rabble? Judas, how could you do it?

Contrasting sharply with this strange and wicked deed a Roman woman, the wife of Pontius Pilate, Governor of the province, interceded with her husband to save Jesus from the Cross. It is unlikely that she had met or talked with Him, perchance only glimpsed Him from her latticed window. Or it may be she had heard the story of His wondrous deeds from some servant in her household. However this may have been, her heart was filled with a vast pity for Jesus and she did what she could in His behalf. She wrote a little note to her husband beseeching him to be considerate of his unusual prisoner and to spare Him pain. The act was wholly unexpected, and, one may believe, without a precedent. It did credit to the goodness of this Roman matron's heart and her womanly intuition. This lovely deed helped to assuage the hurt of the blow of Judas, struck in the dark and under cover of a sign of friendship.

A second paradox was the Defection of the Twelve and the Confession of the Centurion. Jesus' disciples deserted Him in His utmost need. There is no more pathetic verse in all the Scripture than this, "They all forsook Him and fled." Even Simon Peter, who boasted he would stand by his Master if all the others forsook Him, took to his heels. Thomas, the Loyal, slunk away into the night, and John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," was numbered among the deserters.

Over against this unlovely picture of the defection of the company of disciples is another and a different one—that of a Roman officer, the captain in charge of the guard on duty at the Crucifixion. And such a picture it is! This Centurion, accustomed to scenes of bloodshed and human woe, was strangely stirred as he surveyed that central Cross. He observed the dying Nazarene as He provided a home for His mother; listened, as He forgave the penitent robber; heard in amazement His prayer for His enemies; and when at last Jesus died with a victorious cry on His parched lips, this Roman Captain, profoundly moved, exclaimed, "Truly this was the Son

of God.” Now, whatever the Centurion meant by these words, his tribute was as noble as it was surprising. Jesus’ intimates scattered as so many frightened sheep while their Shepherd went to His doom. Look on that picture, and now on this—the grim soldierly figure standing in front of the Cross, a spirit of reverence suffusing his being, an affirmation of homage on his lips. It is a heartening spectacle and helps relieve the intensity the scene, shining as it does like a lone brilliant star on a dark and stormy night.

A third paradox was the Sword of Peter Unsheathed Against the Enemies of Jesus and the Prayer of Jesus from the Cross in Behalf of Those Who Nailed Him There. What a contrast in attitude of mind and emotions; the impetuous disciple stirred to anger, swinging his sword and shedding man’s blood; the serene and suffering Savior praying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” The weapon of this world against the word of the Spirit; the “eye for an eye” doctrine versus the practice of the “other cheek” and the “second mile” teaching. A startling paradox, is it not?

Yet, vivid and arresting as these contrasts are, there is a fourth, more vivid and arresting still. Two friends of Jesus, a devout woman of Bethany and a wealthy citizen of Jerusalem, were the leading characters in the episode of Roses of Bethany and Lilies of Arimathea.

I.

Jesus was a dinner guest in the house of one Simon of Bethany. Lazarus, his sisters, Mary and Martha, and the twelve disciples were honored guests. At an appropriate moment Mary appeared with an alabaster flask filled with a rare and costly perfume. She probably attempted to loosen the stopper but failing in this and in the very abandon of her affection for Jesus she broke the neck of the flask and poured its precious contents in a fragrant stream upon his head so that it ran down His body and dripped to His feet. And the whole house was filled with a fragrance as sweet as the breezes that blow from off an apple orchard in blossom time. The moment was ineffable.

But critics were present. Judas was not pleased with what had occurred and spoke out boldly. “Why was not this perfume sold and the price given to the poor?” he scolded. It was effective. A murmur of disapproval of Mary’s deed passed among the guests as incongruous as a cold wind blowing across a rose garden in June. Then Jesus spoke, administering a stern rebuke to the detractors of Mary’s deed, followed by high praise for Mary. “Why trouble ye her?” He said, “She hath wrought a good work upon Me, for in that she hath poured this ointment on My body, she did it for My burial. Verily I say unto you, wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.” And not even the precious ointment was as fragrant as this speech.

Mary’s gracious deed I love to think of as a cluster of roses given the Master while He could feast His eyes on their beauty and breathe deep their fragrance. What an exquisitely beautiful thing Mary did that day for Jesus’ sake. Nothing could have been more appropriate, nor anything quite so perfect as this deed performed a few days before the billows of hate beat against Jesus and engulfed Him. It was the Roses of Bethany that helped Jesus to bear the thorns of Jerusalem

so soon to pierce His flesh. It was characteristic of Christ to reprimand Mary's critics and praise the author of so gracious and tender a ministry. No bruised reed would He break or smoking flax could He quench.

The thing that clothes Mary's ministry with splendor is the truth that it had apparently no practical purpose. It seemed, in the eyes of cold hard-hearted men, extravagant, wasteful, unnecessary. Yet such deeds, chivalrous, thoughtful, costly, contribute to life something fine and cultural. They are the extras that make life worth living; the over plus without which the days would be drab, the long years dull and dreary. To the stolid, the undiscerning, and the censorious, gifts such as Mary's are always foolish, wasteful, impractical, but to those who live in their affections and are understanding of heart, such offerings are tender, inspiring, full of sentiment, rainbowed with beauty, deathless.

In a Midwestern city there lived for many years the widowed mother of one of the successful business men of America. The son, residing three hundred miles distant, through a period of twenty years sent on Saturday of every week a gift of flowers to his mother. Week after week they came, roses, carnations, violets, sweet peas, orchids, fresh, fragrant, lovely. I estimate that through those twenty years the cost of the weekly gift of flowers was three thousand dollars or more. Was it an extravagance? Is a love gift ever extravagant? Many times I was a guest in that home when a glad-eyed woman upon whom the infirmities of age were stealing, proudly asked me to look at her flowers, the weekly token of her son's solicitous affection. There was a mother who had her roses when they meant most to her; she prized them, doted on them, they filled her life with love, joy, and peace. And when she went the way of all the earth the flowers that filled the room where she lay in the calm dignity of death were not the empty mockery they sometimes seem when too long delayed.

When my gifted friend Joseph Fort Newton went from the pastorate of a church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to become minister of the famous City Temple, London, he did a venturesome thing. Under the most favorable conditions an American preacher in the British Isles is often a lonely creature, as lonely perhaps as a British preacher over here. At the time Dr. Newton began his London ministry this country had not yet gone into the Great War and the relations between the two countries were a little strained. They saw us benefiting financially from the war while they were bled white and they eyed us askance. As the time drew near for Dr. Newton to go into the pulpit that first Sunday he felt singularly depressed and a vast wave of homesickness swept over him. Then it was that an office bearer brought into the vestry a great cluster of American Beauty roses and, with the flowers a cheerful little note assuring Dr. Newton that the congregation were remembering him in grateful prayer. Dr. Newton's drooping spirits were revived magically, He felt renewed in mind and body. He rose grandly to the occasion and spoke with prophetic unction. Roses of Bethany! What good medicine within their petals; what gift of healing in their perfume!

In the zenith of Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis' fame as minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, he lectured in a small Indiana city. He was the guest of the pastor of a little struggling church, a young man who was fighting a hard battle against heavy odds. It happened that Dr. Hillis was in the young preacher's study, and left by himself glanced at the small but carefully selected library.

Observing one of his own books on the topmost shelf he took it down and on the flyleaf the renowned Brooklyn preacher wrote a sentiment, personal and tender, signed his name and returned the book to its place. Some weeks later the young preacher happened to discover the inscription and was overjoyed. The discovery greatly gentled and inspired him, put hope in his heart, a new purpose in his ministry. A little thing you say? Nay, a great thing, beautiful, eloquent, a modern instance of Roses of Bethany just when their beauty and fragrance meant the most.

In a city of the Corn Belt of Illinois a family of fine old-fashioned ideals brought up to a noble maturity a glorious company of sons and daughters. For the most part the children married in the community and settled down there, establishing homes after the same ample pattern of their parents. From the first of their wedded life these young people formed the habit of gathering every Sunday evening in the old home for a light meal together and a joyous family reunion, and the gay and wholesome conversation that glorifies such occasions. As the grandchildren came they were brought along and the custom continued long after both the parents had been taken by death. This custom cost the younger generation some sacrifices and inconveniences, but it repaid the family in countless ways. It imparted splendor to the family life and gave it solidarity. It was another case of roses, red Roses of Bethany.

W.S. Rainsford was for twenty-four years the able rector of St. George's Church, New York. He was a preacher of power, a rare man with a genius for making friends and holding them. He wrote books, lectured widely, and took an active part in community affairs. Dr. Rainsford loved to tell an incident of his early ministry. He was asked to preach on a notable occasion and before an audience of the most influential churchmen of the diocese. He made careful preparation but the sermon didn't "click"; it was a flat failure. At the close of the service he stood apart, feeling miserable, wishing the ground might open and swallow him. He looked about for an exit that would enable him to leave the stage as inconspicuously as possible. Just then a strong hand was laid on his shoulder, and he turned to look into the noble face of Phillips Brooks. "Rainsford," said that Christlike man, "I want you to preach for me next Sunday at Trinity Church." Dr. Rainsford could scarcely believe his ears, but it was true. With some misgivings he accepted the invitation and on Sunday, his face aglow, went into Phillips Brooks' pulpit and preached with great effectiveness, his heart warmed by the gracious deed of his great and good friend. Roses, red, red Roses of Bethany-what a ministry in their fresh beauty, their sweet fragrance!

II

Joseph of Arimathea was evidently a prominent citizen of Jerusalem, wealthy and influential. He was a member of the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin, a man of high standing, reputable, a chief citizen. He was more than an admirer of Jesus; he had come to be His disciple, but not openly. He was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews, according to the statement in the fourth Gospel. There is something pathetic in this comment, and not altogether creditable to Joseph. Here was a man of high social and business standing, interested in a spiritual teacher, sprung from the common people, whose strong indictment of the religious leaders of His day had made Him a heretic and a rebel. Joseph of Arimathea could not get the consent of his will to step boldly out and take his stand publicly as a disciple of Jesus. What would his family say? What would his

friends think? Let us believe that he struggled to overcome this fear. It was an acid test and Joseph failed to meet it.

It is not difficult to imagine how Joseph must have suffered when he saw Jesus led through the streets of Jerusalem, on His way to die the death of a common felon. Picture him looking out from his sheltered room watching the pitiful procession and Jesus staggering beneath the burden of the cross. Hear in anguish say to himself, "Oh that I had the courage to go out now and stand by Him, to brave the taunts of all Jerusalem and help Him bear His cross, cheer Him along the sorrowful way." But no, Joseph could not bring himself to do that. He tried and failed. The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. The procession passed him by without any open discipleship of Jesus on the part of the Arimathean while the Teacher was living. The heart of the chief citizen of Jerusalem was with the Savior as He went to His death but he walked not by His side, nor raised his voice in Jesus' behalf.

The supreme tragedy moved on apace; Calvary claimed an innocent victim. The irony of the cross was at an end. After six hours of darkness, pain, and suffering Jesus died, saying "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." The multitude scattered; the weeping women withdrew; the saddest of days drew to its close. Then, and not until then, did Joseph of Arimathea come out into the open. Boldly he went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus that he might give it a decent burial in his own tomb. The Roman governor acceded to his request and he who had failed to associate himself with Jesus in life became identified with Him in death. The portraits that show the descent of Jesus from the cross, particularly that of Ruben's, are worthy of anyone's study. Gently, tenderly, they took down the body, and decently composed it for burial. Joseph of Arimathea carefully supervised the necessary preparations for entombment. Nothing was too good for the lifeless form. The finest of linen was wrapped about the body, and costly balm and myrrh generously used. Thus in Joseph's new tomb where no body had rested, Jesus of Nazareth was given the burial of the rich and the great.

I would not belittle this ministry of Joseph of Arimathea, nor overlook his solicitude for the dead body of Jesus. It is not without its practical side, nor is it devoid of sentiment. It cost Joseph something to do this deed. To brave the criticism of his fellow citizens even at so late an hour called for courage. But this deed suffers when compared with Mary's fragrant deed. It came too late to accomplish the greatest good. White lilies of Arimathea never appear so white and cold as when they are contrasted with warm, red Roses of Bethany.

Ponder these incisive lines by a modern poet, inscribed, "To Joseph of Arimathea":

"Strange quiet man, what impulse in your breast

Invoked your kindness to the Master whom

You had not dared to join? He wanted rest

Within your heart, but found it in your tomb,

Did you not dare to love him, he who sought

To give you life, nor asked for recompense?

What pity that in finding him you brought

Your laggard love in death's cold ceremonies!"

In an eastern city, an able and hard working minister decided, after a struggle, to resign from the church to which he had ministered for a decade, and accept another pastorate in a distant state. There was no particular reason for his leaving save a feeling that there was no great demand for his remaining. The Church was in excellent condition, he had a constructive program, things were going well, yet somehow he was not sure that the sentiment for his remaining was strong enough to justify it. After heartache and struggle he resigned. He read his resignation at a Sunday service and there followed a great demonstration of esteem and affection. The next day one of the most influential members of the congregation, a man naturally reserved and distant, called to see him. To the minister's surprise his visitor had come to tell him how much his sermons had meant to him, instancing one in particular which had profoundly affected his life. The preacher listened with amazement till his visitor had finished, then he said, "Why didn't you let me know this before? Why didn't you talk like this to me a week ago? If you had done so it might have helped me to a different decision." The man of business was silent for a time, when he said, "I don't know. I suppose I took it for granted that you understood, or maybe I just forgot it. Anyway, I can't think of an excuse. I'm sorry, dreadfully sorry." Lilies, white, white Lilies!

At the north side of Cass Park, Detroit, is a statue of Robert Burns. It is a fine piece of bronze and attracts the attention of many a passerby. It stands on a pedestal on the four sides of which are pictured scenes from "Tam o'Shanter" and "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Following the annual birthday of Scotland's famous son, gorgeous flowers, costly garlands and myriad wreaths, are heaped lavishly about this statue. More than once I have stopped and mused awhile before this garlanded bronze figure, with the flowers heaped at its base. Standing thus I remembered how much the poet suffered in life, how shabbily he was treated, even by those who should have known better and for whom excuses are difficult to find. I recalled the poet's poverty, the pitifulness of it all, and I thought, "Robert Burns has now his Lilies of Arimathea in profusion, but when he most needed flowers there were no red roses to touch his heart and gladden the eyes of him who sang,

"... how poor religion's pride,

In all the pomp of method and of art,

When men display to congregations wide,

Devotion's every grace, except the heart!

The power incensed the pageant will desert,

The pompous strain, the sacerdotal stole;
But, haply, in some cottage far apart,
May hear, well pleased, the language of the soul,
And in His book of life the inmates poor enroll.”

I have been attending Lincoln celebrations for many years and am accustomed to hear the great Kentuckian eulogized and praised to the skies. Such homage is due one of the supreme figures of all times, yet when I listen to eloquent speakers lavish encomiums on Abraham Lincoln I recall how few roses he had in his lifetime. He was never a popular hero in the days of his flesh. I recall that when the “bronzed, lank man, prairie lawyer, master of us all,” was bearing the colossal burden of state a partisan arose in the Congress and said, “You might search Hell over and find no more miserable wretch than Abraham Lincoln.” Would that the “Captain of the mighty heart” might have had a little of the praise during his lifetime that we heap upon his memory now that he has gone from among us. Lilies in profusion for Lincoln dead, but few red roses for Lincoln living, when the way he chose was long, lonely, and hard.

During the World War an American President dreamed a great dream of the nations of the world leagued together to further the cause of peace on earth and good will among men. In ardent sincerity this man, when there seemed no other solution, led us into a war to end war, ever keeping in mind the idea of an international agreement for world peace. The aftermath of the world conflict involved him in controversy, broke him physically and brought upon his head an avalanche of detraction and bitter criticism such as happened to no other American president save Lincoln. He went to his death a victim of the Great War as truly as any soldier who fell on Flanders Field. After the “great teacher death” had brought peace to this prophet of a better day, eulogies fell from the lips of those who had spat venom and bitterly assailed him in life. Editorials praised him to the skies and the Nation wept by his coffin. Would that he had had some of these roses when the days were long and the way was bitter; would that some of this praise might have been spoken when Woodrow Wilson was here in the flesh staggering beneath his Herculean task, beset by political foes, engulfed by the hate and poison of war, a victim of the disillusionment and moral lapse that followed the Armistice.

In a western city some years ago the custodian of a downtown church happening to pass the building late at night saw a light in the pastor’s study and a dim glow in the auditorium. He investigated and found a young man on his knees back of the pulpit, sobbing and crying: “O my father, if I could only see you just once more. You were the best father any boy ever had. O my father, my father!” It was the brilliant wayward son of a famous preacher who had died a year previous. The youth, a wanderer who had been half way around the world, did not know of his father’s death until he reached the city. He paced the streets for hours and having a pass key to the church let himself into the building, visited his father’s former study, seated himself for awhile at the desk where his father used to work, and later made his way into the auditorium, where the custodian found him sobbing out his grief. Lilies - white, white Lilies of Arimathea! Could anything be sadder or more fraught with pathos?

Old Doctor Samuel Johnson understood the meaning of Lilies of Arimathea. Alas, how well he knew the futility of a kindness done too late is mirrored in his famous letter to Lord Chesterfield when that nobleman took a tardy notice of Johnson's monumental work, "A Dictionary of the English Language." The old Doctor's letter, in which he set forth his opinion of a belated service, is phrased in marvelous English. The heart of that letter is as follows:

"Seven years, my lord, have now passed since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favor. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a patron before . . . The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labors, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am known and do not want it. I hope it is no cynical asperity, not to confess obligations when no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a patron which Providence has enabled me to do for myself."

Belated kindnesses, neglected offices of sympathy, postponed ministries that might have soothed, healed and blest - how their memories haunt and trouble us! There is nothing new in this theme. It is as old as humanity. Certain as we are of change, and inevitable as we know death to be, we neglect and postpone the most beautiful ministries of life. It costs so little to be kind, means so much to be considerate, is divine to forgive. Why withhold when to share is to save?

Jesus magnified life and minimized death. He went about doing good. Life with Him was all important, death but an incident, an episode. We are prone to reverse this order, are strangely forgetful of others in the midst of life and when death and disaster come to those about us seek to offset our sins of omission by opulent offerings brought too late to accomplish the greatest good.

Abraham Lincoln never wrote anything more revealing or more practical than the sentiment which he set down in a letter to his dear friend Joshua Speed:

"Speed, die when I may, I want it said of me by those who knew me best that I always plucked a thistle and planted a flower where a flower would grow."

Yes, pluck thistles and plant flowers; plant them everywhere. Plant roses, red, red Roses of Bethany. And plant them NOW!