

IT HAPPENED IN PALESTINE

by

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“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

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TO

DIXON, KINGSLEY, AND MARGARET

PREFACE

RUSKIN, in his *Modern Painters*, points to one of the most fruitful devotional exercises I know. He describes it as an attempt "to be present, as if in the body, at each recorded event in the life of the Redeemer." Nothing is more certain, in my own mind, than that Jesus's personal friendship with men and women in the days of His flesh was the potent means of changing their lives and their entire outlook. It was not an elaborate ritual which He instituted; it was not a creed which He taught; it was not an elaborate organisation which He set moving. I am far from belittling any of these things, but, in my view, they are all secondary to the central experience of personal relationship with Christ, and, indeed, they all fall short of their purpose now, unless they make His friendship real, and set forth our communion with Him as the only thing that vitally matters.

I do not know where the reader may be whose eye catches these words, but let him close the book for a moment and imagine Jesus present, standing near Him, in the body. Let the reader then imagine Jesus coming with him into every part of the life of that day; into his

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business, his professional interviews, his home ; into every phase and relationship of his life. What a difference even in one day ! But supposing we could live with Him for a week, a year, three years ! Supposing we could see Him dealing with difficult people. How changed we should be ! How significant are the words, " They had been with Jesus." ¹

Is anything, therefore, more important to the Christian than to make the attempt to get the spiritual equivalent of what His personal friendship must have meant to men and women in the days of His flesh ? And can that be done in any better way than the one to which Ruskin points ? By allowing the imagination lovingly and devoutly to meditate on the four gospels we can make an attempt " to be present, as if in the body," at some of the recorded events in the life of the Redeemer.

A recent visit to Palestine with four friends gave me the inestimable privilege of visiting the places made famous by " the things which Jesus began to do and to teach." Interiors are disappointing sometimes, but the " out-of-doors " thrilled me to the depths, and immeasurably deepened my reverence for the Gospel writers, my sense of the solid foundations on which historical Christianity rests, and my adoration of

¹ Acts iv. 13.

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the Master. Whatever happens, no one can take the blue from the lake of Galilee, or alter the contour of the hills round Nazareth where He walked as a boy, or rob Gethsemane of its awed hush. I have tried, in the following pages, to use my experiences in Palestine in the painting of word pictures which aim at making the figure of the Master stand out more clearly still.

Such study of psychology as I have been able to make in twenty years I have tried to use toward the same end. That study makes me feel how little I understand that amazing complication called the human mind and how well the Master knew its every device and means of self-deception. Slowly and stumblingly, modern psychological methods are feeling their way to treatments which lay bare the cause of human breakdown and distress, and which seek to bring comfort, healing, and adjustment to wounded and bewildered minds. With what unerring understanding He knew His way along those labyrinthine paths in which even the best psychologists so easily get lost. No mere wonder-worker He. There is no mere magic. The diversity of His methods shows this. The scientific healer, be he doctor, surgeon, or psychologist, has much in common with Him. His method differs as the case differs. In one case a word suffices.¹ But

¹ See pp. 65 ff.

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in another He spends literally hours in treatment.¹ Some modern methods of so-called "faith healing" forget that one can have faith without healing and healing without faith. They demand what is miscalled faith and put all the onus on the patient, cruelly concluding that if healing does not follow, the patient had no faith and, equally mistakenly, that if he is healed he had faith. Such methods find no support for their rough treatment, which does not vary as the nature of the case varies, in the careful methods of the Master which differed so widely with different patients. Modern healing missions sometimes forget that Jesus *always understood the psychological cause of the condition.*

In this book I have tried to share with the reader the privilege of visiting Palestine. I have tried to share any psychological insight I may have gathered into the minds of those who came into contact with Jesus and to show some of the inner meaning of the things He said and did. Above all, I hope the reader will "see Jesus." To watch Him working with men and women in Palestine long ago is to realise how He deals with men and women to-day, and how He will deal with us if we will let Him. It is my hope that the book may send the reader back to read his New Testament again with new eyes, and

¹ See pp. 73 ff.

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that from those hallowed pages there may step forth the ever-living Saviour and Lord, confronting, challenging, comforting, and healing as in the days of His flesh. For life begins again with new radiance, power, and meaning when Jesus comes alive. Things that happened in Palestine are no longer dull facts of past history, but shining facts of modern personal experience.

I cannot adequately express my thanks. My friends Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Appleyard of Leeds took me to Palestine with their two daughters, Margot and Joyce, and made me feel one of the family by a kindness which I can never repay. That trip fulfilled the dream of a lifetime for me.

My beloved father-in-law, the Rev. Arthur Triggs, has once more worked through the proofs and given me his invaluable counsel and help, which I greatly prize.

I am greatly indebted to my friend the famous antiquary, known to all students of the excavator's art, especially in Biblical lands, Mr. J. R. Ogden, J.P., F.S.A. He has read my MS. through and made many most helpful suggestions, which I have eagerly adopted. He has also greatly helped me in securing photographs.

I have thought it wise to have the book read by one who has just returned from Palestine

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lest any of my two-year-old impressions should prove inaccurate, and my friend and successor, the Rev. W. E. Sangster, B.A., has kindly done this for me.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my friend Miss Lorna Shirley Smith, who has corrected the proofs, made most helpful suggestions, and contributed some valuable photographs which she herself took in Palestine.

Mr. Harold Shepstone has provided some excellent photographs, for which I am grateful. A few of the photographs are my own.

My wife has finally checked the proofs and helped me prepare the book for the press. I must mention my two former secretaries, who both helped in typing and other detailed work, Miss E. M. Bailey and Mr. Philip Found. Mr. Leonard Cutts, of the firm of Hodder & Stoughton, has been as courteous, efficient, and on-the-spot as ever. I have found it hard to live up to his business-like promptitude, and the delayed publication is due to the pressure of my other work.

Help of other kinds is mentioned in footnotes throughout the book. Where psychological cases have been quoted, unimportant details have been altered in order to protect the patients. I have again taken the liberty of using the word "patient" because it seems the

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least unsuitable word. Perhaps it is well to explain that I have used the names " Matthew " and " John " to denote the writers of the First and Fourth Gospels. I am aware of the controversy raging still on this matter of authorship, but it seemed too pedantic and confusing to write " the editor of the First Gospel," or " the author of the Fourth Gospel," in every case.

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CHAPTER I
AT BETHLEHEM

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AT BETHLEHEM

WHAT magic there is in the word "Bethlehem"! All over the world, wherever Christian people celebrate Christmas, this word carries its magic into human hearts. We all interpret it according to our own nationality and temperament and make-up. Just as Leonardo da Vinci painted his picture of "The Last Supper" with an Italian table on which Italian rolls were set for those who should eat, so we picture Bethlehem according to English tradition and custom.

A wide hillside on a glittering frosty night. The moon high in the sky in a setting of fleecy clouds. Shepherds, wrapped in heavy mantles and blankets, crouching over a fire, trying to keep warm. And near them sheep huddled together for warmth in some rude fold open to the sky. Then the angels. The sky filled with their luminous presence; and the shepherds lifting half-incredulous, wonder-stricken faces upward to see them. Then the majestic voices. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among the men of goodwill." It is not difficult to picture that.

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In the distance the town of Bethlehem. The beckoning, soft light of its inn, nestling cosily under the lee of a protecting hill. And in a stable, warm and straw-covered, fragrant with hay and with the breath of the mild and patient beasts, a beautiful maiden with her new-born, bonny babe at her breast, and Joseph standing there, rugged, protective, strong. To that scene come three wise men, one at least in rich and royal robes. Kneeling on the straw, they offer their gifts : gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity, myrrh for humanity. What a lovely picture it is !

I think the reader would be quite cross with me if I wrote that Jesus was not born in December at all, and that He was not born in the stable of an inn. No one knows what month it was when Jesus was born. Both April and August have been suggested. Of the two April is more likely. Shepherds might well be busy throughout the night in the lambing season, but not in December when the hills round Bethlehem are frequently covered with snow. In that month the sheep would not be out on the hillsides, nor would the shepherds spend the night in the open.

December the twenty-fifth came to be Christmas Day because, in the early Church, of which so many slaves were members throughout the Roman Empire, that date was the Roman

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Saturnalia, the feast held to celebrate the end of the winter. Huge fires were lighted and every Roman celebrated the lengthening days and the returning sun. Everybody had a holiday and so the early Christians, with their day's holiday, celebrated the birth of Him whose coming into their lives was more welcome than the sunshine.

Nor was Jesus born in a stable in our sense of the word. St. Luke¹ says there was no room in the inn and St. Matthew² says the birth took place in a house. When one has seen some of the houses in Bethlehem, as they are even to-day, one gets a new light on what may have happened. "Guest-houses," as we might term them, were not uncommon. Finding the village inn full, Joseph may have turned to one of them to find shelter for his wife in her hour of need. So the inhabitants of Oberammergau open their homes for the visitors to the Passion Play who cannot find rooms in the hotels during the time when the town is so crowded. My friends and I would have found no room in the inn. We had the honour of staying in the home of Herr Alois Lang, who so wonderfully played the part of Christ. Another suggestion is that the Holy Family were the guests of relatives in Bethlehem. If Bethlehem were Joseph's native place, then it is very probable that some

¹ ii. 7.

² ii. 11.

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of his relatives still lived there. If this were so, we can more easily understand why the Holy Family stayed there nearly two years when their home and business were in Nazareth, and they only needed to come to Bethlehem for the census. Our evidence for the long period is, of course, that the massacre of the innocents, ordered by Herod, was a massacre of all male children, *of two years old and under*.¹ I have sometimes wondered whether the strange circumstances of the birth, which earlier had made Joseph consider putting Mary "away privily,"² made him shy of returning quickly to Nazareth where gossiping tongues would be so busy concerning Mary's child. To neglect a business for two years requires a fairly strong reason in the case of a comparatively poor man.

Look at the inside of a Bethlehem house. You go in on the street level to one big room, the floor of which is just the earth, beaten down hard. Two-thirds of the room are on the ground level. One-third, at the farther end, is raised up eighteen inches or two feet high. On this kind of dais the family lives. Here is the oven, the baby's hammock, the lamp-stand, the sleeping-mats. Here the family has its meals. The lower level is used to house the animals at night so that they are safe from robbers. A donkey,

¹ Matt. ii. 16.

² Matt. i. 19.