

of writing. How about poetry? Some of you, I know, are very good at that. Why not think of submitting something for use in Perspectives? And please don't think you have to wait to be asked. We delight in surprises, and we welcome variety.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient records from Time tell of the Beni lad (that is, the "Blessed") who kept sheep, finding such joy in the myriad stars of his Maker's heavens and in the patriarchal histories of the Beni race, that his songs came down through the ages and are even sung today! Though in later life this shepherd became a man of blood, hunted, betrayed, and even grievously fallen, yet he never lost his kingliness or the SongWords of his youth, passing them on to his sons and generations beyond, even unto Lastimes. He was, as you know, the sweet singer of Repentancejoy ("Dankesingen"), David. Singing and giving thanks was a trait strata deep in the Beni character. Asked by the Inquisitors why, the Confessors said, "It is our Chief goal to Praise God and to enjoy Him, now in Time and Always." They really believed this must be so; for at the stake, parents bound with their children prayed, sang, and gave thanks, encouraging one another as the flames devoured their bodies.

And They Taught Their Children

by Esther Kamps

The family I am going to tell you about lived in the period of history known as Lastimes. Nathaniel Faithful was a farmer. Not rich, but wise. He had lost his father's farm to a dishonest uncle during the great famine of '97. He and his wife Jerusha had packed all their possessions and seven children on the old cart given him by a Beni neighbor, along with the ten chickens his uncle scorned to keep, and a few oddments of housekeeping — blankets, pans, a bit of mismatched crockery. Jerusha, with a newborn son at her breast, was hard put to keep countenance as they rolled, creaking, out the lane under the canopy of the beloved ancient maples. What Nathaniel thought, the angels knew; but he was seen to swallow hard a number of times as the bend

of the road took them for all time out of sight of the old stone farmhouse, passed from father to eldest son for generations. The trees hid the little family graveyard from view. If the children expected their mother to break down as they left behind the one small grave, they were mistaken. At most they saw a rebel sigh.

Already uncle Ahab's workmen were tearing down the old boundary wall along the road and carting the quarried stones up the hill pasture for a new hog barn. The boys, seeing this, gritted their teeth in dismay. How could it be that their father, so godly and true, could be so betrayed? The precious vineyard too was being burned and uprooted to make way for bigger barns. Its smoke could have accounted for the smarting eyes. Probably not. The muscles of the cartiers' horses rippled and bulged with power, their sweat glinting in the sunlight. Some of those colts Nathaniel had raised himself, for he had ever a way of making his livestock prosper. Seeing those horses pass — some of whom would have nickered in response had he but called their names — Nathaniel found it necessary to pray with all his might in order to submit under this bitter blow. His sons wondered at his silence.

In fact the taste of shame was in their throats, choking them. What a sad contrast, the scrawny shanks of the old mare, bought with the small monies left to Nathaniel! As the insolent cartiers jolted and bounced past, there was barely room left on the road for the ragged refugees. They were covered by the billowing dust of the heavy wheels and sickened to their very souls by the raucous songs fading off up the hill.

Jerusha heard Nathaniel give what seemed like a groan and then, to her surprise, the moan turned to humming. The name of the song is long forgotten: "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" or "I am a Stranger Here," something like that. (In later years the boys would argue over it.) The important thing was that Jerusha, beginning to rock to and fro with baby Jeremy, joined in, her voice silvery, a mite shakey, the tears slipping down her face. Never had she felt so deeply her love for Nathaniel and her thankfulness for having been given him. At the second verse she was able to turn, giving the eldest daughter Ruth a smile and a look which said louder than words, "Come, you're the oldest; be an example; help me. We will sing away our tears. We will give thanks." This episode at this traumatic point in the family life was probably the most important lesson the parents had ever taught their children. Certainly the most effective.

They settled finally near a town called Abatoir, where father Faithful found work in a slaughterhouse. It was cruelly hard, especially

the sheep days. But Nathaniel did not despise to spend his strength to feed his children. His bread of self denial and killing toil was sweet to him and his Sabbaths precious. Then in Kirkhall those keen blue eyes, so lonely for the old fields, would gladden, caressing his family lined up scrubbed and shiny-nosed on the Worship Bench, singing with the other Beni.

At home Jerusha cleaned, cooked, sang, and read to her children. If she missed her old kitchen she never spoke of it. If fear of the wicked city of Abatoir overwhelmed her, she prayed. If the loneliness and poverty dragged at her spirits betimes, it was not visible. She was a Beni, daughter of the Beni race. She busied herself making the home a cheerful place, establishing the comforting routines of chores and pleasures, rewarded by the love which, received from the Almighty, she poured out on everyone under her roof. Given the twin gifts of contentment and joy, she shared them unstintingly. Her daughters saw and heeded. Her sons, at first bewildered by their father's fall into poverty, began to understand. And they were happy together.

Then came the awful days of the Great Apostasy. A messenger from Satan came to their Kirkhall, a subtle, lying prophet, a Masque Wearer. For many months the words sounded the same. Although there was a certain something missing, a strange lack of nourishment, especially of comfort, though certainly not a lack of words! Then slowly it began to become clear to the Faithfuls that this was an Imitator, not a true Thus-Sayer at all. Jerusha and Nathaniel, more alarmed than they had ever been over the robbery of their farm, discussed the problem in hushed voices night after night in the darkness of their bedroom.

Suddenly one Sabbath morning the satanic emissary, waxing bold, came out clearly saying: "God needs your help. He can't do anything without you. He's giving you a chance today. Won't you take it? Don't let Satan win!" The congregation were smiling in pleased agreement. Nathaniel and Jerusha gathered their children and left in stunned silence, exchanging shocked glances with the older ones. Their fragile shelter perched on the edge of the city Slaughterhouse ("Abatoir") had come crashing down. Cast adrift, aliens once more. Where to go?

The completeness of their second betrayal would only dawn on them fully in the months to come as they traveled towards Death-shadow Range, searching shelter in Bacca Valley, where rumor had it that there were still Beni of the old school. Uncertain as to how to reach that country or even if they could pass the border unhindered, it was enough for each day's journey to know they had done the right thing in fleeing the great Blasphemer with all the speed they could

muster — for themselves, for the children's safety, for the honor of God Himself, whose name was being blasphemed, and that in the very Kirkhall.

So once again the old creaking cart carried its precious cargo away. The old mare had long ago been sold, but an ox which five minutes from the kill floor had been judged too poor to sell for meat, had been bought by Nathaniel in exchange for after-hours work. Tending it in the shed behind his house with all his farmer's cunning, he had hoped to sell it for a profit when back in full flesh. Already halfway to strength under his patient and compassionate hand, the ox was now pulling them with unhurried tread away from the sluggish watershed of Abatoir, out Hugonaut Valley towards the mountains of Deathshadow Range. So full of concern for his family's future, the unborn babe, finding nightly shelter, and the like, Nathaniel realized the wonderful providence of the ox, but just barely.

As to Providence! At night they camped out under the stars, in a hard and hostile country; yet they met no travelers whatever, for the angels had been sent to protect them. The boys approved their father's new venture, not for the proper motive perhaps. To them it was one vast lark, yet they too felt some of the burden, and worked willingly pitching camp each night, helping with the ox, finding wood, fetching water. Their campfire in the wilderness resounded with song, even as the light faded off the mountain peaks towering above them. That those songs became more and more prayers of longing was only natural. It was a time of family unity. It seemed that the ugliness of their pilgrimage into Abatoir was fading from mind, washed away by the clean mountain air and those splendid nights under God's sky.

It was as if the Holy Book had come to life in their lives. They read with joy of the patriarchs, finding comfort in their "trials of cruel mockings and scourgings," especially those who "wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, tormented." Hungrily they read the words "of whom the world was not worthy," who "wandered in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." Only as these thoughts took hold of their hearts did they realize how near the house of death they had been in Abatoir, and how close they had been to partaking of its poison. These things they discussed earnestly around their fire at night. Father spoke of them to the boys as they plodded beside the ox up the laborious switchbacks of the mountain passes. Jerusha spoke of it as she and her daughters and little ones labored over the evening meals. Their souls, so long overwrought with the weight of darkness and dread, seemed now to soar

like the mountains round about. The angels saw and were glad.

Nevertheless the journey grew long; provisions were short. The wagon, not sturdy to begin with, was showing signs of imminent collapse. Jerusha wore herself out devising ways to entertain and teach the children who grew fractious with the unrelenting boredom, fatigue, and desire for food other than dry bread and wild rabbit stew. They had crossed the pass the day before, puzzling over which branching road to follow. Choosing the less traveled one, they had descended rapidly into a tree-lined, dusty road amid tidy fields. Feeling unwell, Jerusha had given Jeremy to Ruth to coax to sleep. As darkness approached she could feel that Nathaniel's heart was in his boots. Here was rich farmland, but not his to till. . . she heard him sigh. The faith he had felt so strongly up in the mountains seemed empty and as dusty as this road to nowhere. The storms which had spared them up on the heights seemed to be gathering now as Nathaniel cast a weather eye aloft. Everything was against him, and it would soon be night. How would he provide for these hungry children?

Jerusha could not tell if it was hunger or the nausea of pregnancy which was making her feel so witless and desperate. She knew that Nathaniel would ask for shelter at the approaching farmhouse, grand and lordly though it appeared. She knew too what it was costing him. His face told the tale of yet another humiliation, drawn out, agonizingly as the stolid tread of their faithful beast drew them slowly nearer. Everyone, gritty with the dust, was past tiredness. Now when she most needed to pray, the words fled from her mind. Rummaging mentally through her scanty supplies, Jerusha was wondering frantically what she could rig for supper. So small a larder to begin with, so little left! Worried and distraught, it was small wonder that she did not at first hear the singing as the cart squeaked to a standstill.

The children heard it though. The music rising out of the farmhouse windows signalled the end of their long trek. Little sister Becky leaped down from the tail gate and skampered after Father, her face alight. His own eyes ignited with hope too as he recognized the music. It was one of the shepherdsongs: "As the hart about to falter in its trembling agony, panteth for the brooks of water, so my soul doth pant for thee."

The notes of a homemade zither hesitated, then stopped with Nathaniel's knocking, and the door swung open.

Before them stood Isak The Fountain. He was a man of stocky physique, strong, dark visaged, stern. A face lined with many cares and sorrows of life lit up with a smile of such welcoming and benevolence that Nathaniel could have wept for pure relief. In moments, all the

farmhouse occupants were galvanized into action: setting a meal before the strangers (welcomed as if they had been angels), arranging for quick baths for the children, rounding up blankets, towels, spare garments, and showing them to their beds. Oh happy day, real beds, with sheets, hand-woven, patched, darned, but clean and like silk to weary little bodies! Prayers that night were brief but heartfelt by children pushed almost to the edge of their courage, children who fell asleep to the sound of singing, thinking, "Is it angels?"

Cleaned and refreshed, the others gathered at the huge kitchen table around steaming, home-brewed "tea" to exchange their stories and to close the day in prayer. How renewed father Faithful felt, knowing his prayers had been answered once again. His family had found refuge (even the faithful ox which Isak praised: "The best creature for the plow, now that we are forbidden machines"). Isak was pleased and astonished with their arrival across so many dangers. He eyed the eldest Faithful sons with pleasure. Here was the manpower so badly lacking: young men he could teach the crafts needed to support his growing "Family" in a society where the Beni were forbidden the use of money. Here were young men to step in the gap as the older generation passed on. Best of all, here was Nathaniel Faithful, whose name told the whole story of who and what he was. Here was the sorely needed second pillar in the small Kirk that gathered in the Stone Farmhouse. Now, as the boys trooped in from the barn (or "grange," as the Fountains called it), Harmony Fountain found place for them, bringing fresh crusty bread and steaming hearty soup. She was one of those women, who having a small family herself, was forever mothering other people. She was happy to see Jerusha so obviously with child and was thinking: "Ah, God is good; He is giving us another little one!" Jerusha, for her part, was thinking happy thoughts about finding a congenial friend, someone to share her womanly concerns about the raising of the children. Harmony took the last soup to the table and found a place by Jerusha. Tomorrow's bread sat quietly rising under a cloth by the fire-blackened brick oven at the chimney.

It was fully dark now. The flickering light of the kitchen fire giving the only light. Outside, let the wind howl. Inside all was well. Isak began his story: "You must understand, my friends, that you are welcome here. More than welcome — needed. We are hard pressed to do all that needs doing. The days are not long enough." He paused, looking directly at Nathaniel. "However, I must warn you: there have been persecutions here. There may be again."

Nathaniel spoke hesitatingly, "Sometimes outright persecution helps

us." He was not a man of eloquent speech, yet all understood, especially his family, having so recently escaped the Blasphemers. Dire as their penury had been, Nathaniel and his wife and children knew, worse things there were than physical danger. The allurements of the city Abatoir Nathaniel had seen daily. Working in the "Belly" of its slums he had feared for his sons. To him the city was one vast kill floor. The filth, the daggar men, and their equally deadly women, smiling their death's-head smiles to the sound of castanet, the flick of fan and skirt, and the sensuous thrumming of drum and stringed instruments, luring the foolish. Yes, one vast slaughterhouse! He shuddered. How scarcely had they escaped it? How welcome would the bodily danger be in contrast to the spiritual, Nathaniel thought, glancing at Jerusha with concern.

Isak's resonant voice broke into Nathaniel's thoughts: "In those days my father's health was failing. So we sons would take the produce by caravan across Danger Mountain to the trading place. For even in that day money was forbidden to us because we would not 'Take the Mark.' Always he had warned us of the allurements and pitfalls. How well he knew that when the gypsy music played with the dancers whirling their skirts and flaunting their bodies, how hard it was not to listen, to watch, and to lust. In consequence he had always before gone with us, watching our own. I was betrothed then; Harmony's parents were staying here at the farm. I could not wait to return to her." An expression of remembered sorrow darkened his face.

Isak cleared his throat, continuing, "A storm had been building for some time. The mountain pass would be treacherous if it broke while we were crossing. We held back because of the cattle, especially the Cartier brothers who had gone with us. Yet we were all uneasy." Harmony and Isak exchanged a spousely look across their safe snug kitchen, where the sturdy red geraniums sitting in the window wells nodded bright and brave against the darkness outside. "I wanted my brothers to start home. Another night of waiting and we would miss our Kirkday." The deep lines in Isak's face fell once more into the pattern of grief.

"It was Earnst Cartier who brought the terrible news. He had overheard it at the horse market. Of course then we made haste, our hearts leaden with fear.

"I remember the time with shame because prayer was so far from me when it should have accompanied every breath." Isak sighed deeply. Harmony looked down at her hands, tears springing afresh, even after so many years. "As we came around the mountain, the

whole valley lay below us a-smoke. I was beside myself. The marauders had come and left. Too late we were! I grabbed one of the Cartier's horses and galloped down that terrible pass like a madman."

He cleared his throat, then continued. "I'm telling you this so that you will know that these things can really happen if you stay. YOU could live to see your wife or children disembowelled or hung from the nearest tree for refusing to 'Take the Mark.' Can you imagine how it was? No, you can't! Let me tell you! The sheds were afire. They had slain my father, my mother, my three younger brothers. The barnyard was spattered with their blood. Their bodies lay around mother in a circle. Her fingers were still clutching pages from the Book. The marauders had ripped it from her grasp and thrown it into the fire as she lay dying.

"My sisters, and my betrothed had taken the little ones into the deep cellars. Harmony's parents gave their lives leading the soldiers away from the hiding place. Only their twelve-year-old son Isaiah Gladden escaped. He ran to the next farm and warned the Cartier womenfolk."

There was silence in the kitchen a good while as an ancient clock ticked patiently on. Finally Isak came to the crux of his statement. "I cannot allow you to think the days of persecution were anything but terrible. Our faith was tried, our spirits plumbed. There was no escape, no warning, and no mercy. And yet?" — his magnificent, deep brown eyes kindled with joy and the characteristic gentle smile softened the contours of his care-worn face — "and yet God spared us; His Spirit was very near to us. He fed us with heavenly food. And a new generation was given us to rebuild and teach. We have sons and daughters here to labor with until He comes — yet a little while, my friends, in which to live by faith! Will you join us, brother Nathaniel? Here is toil, here is tears, here is peril. But here also is Communion." He spread out his hands at the assembled guests. "Here are children to be taught God's ways, children yet unborn, youth coming to manhood and womanhood. What do you say, Brother?" Two men so different in appearance, so weighted by responsibilities, clasped hands across the table. Outside a mighty wind was screaming at the shutters and down the chimney. As the storm front whipped down Bacca Valley (Valley Tearful), the crack and fury sounded about them. The good stone house which had sheltered so many children from such storms stood fast with never so much as a shaking or shifting of its rocky foundation. The men looked at their families gathered about the fire and opened the Book.

(to be continued) □■□