

The Little Maid of Israel

(The story of Naaman and Elisha)



Stories to Grow Up With

The Little Maid of Israel

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CHAPTER I

In the Land of Israel, not a great distance from the city of Samaria, lived Ezra with his wife, Sarah, and their two children, Isaac and Leah. The sun was sinking behind the hills as Ezra and Sarah sat before the door of their humble dwelling resting after the labors of the day. On a couch in the doorway reclined a youth with a pale, sickly face and emaciated limbs. Isaac, the eldest-born of Ezra and Sarah, had been a cripple from birth. His eyes, dull and languid from constant pain, tired and sad, were fixed eagerly upon the wide white road stretching away in the distance until it was lost among the hills.

At length, with an impatient sigh, he turned his pale, sickly face towards his mother and said: "See, mother, the sun has nearly set; why is Leah so long? It was sunrise when she set out for Samaria, surely she should have returned by now."

"You forget, my son, that your sister had much to do in Samaria," replied Sarah, soothingly. "First to sell the fruits and then to purchase necessities for our household; also the donkey of our neighbor being old and stiff, can travel but slowly."

"That's true, mother," exclaimed the lad, petulantly. "But my sister always has the same tasks and returns from Samaria before the setting of the sun. I fear that some bad thing has happened," and his lip quivered with pain while his large, soft eyes dilated with fear.

"Be quiet my son! Why do you frighten your mother with these thoughts?" cried Ezra, impatiently, as Sarah's cheek grew pale. "What ill could have befallen your sister?"

"She may have fallen into the hands of the Syrians, whom you know make raids into our country and carry off captives," answered the lad, tremulously. "Oh, if I were only as other lads these burdens should not fall upon the weak shoulders of a maiden. It would be I who would journey into Samaria with the fruits," and tears of bitter pain and humiliation filled his eyes.

Sarah leaned forward and gently smoothed back the dark, curling hair from his white brow.

"Don't talk that way, my son," she murmured, with infinite tenderness. "I love you even the more tenderly because of your affliction, and well you know how your sister's heart aches over you."

A faint smile touched the lad's pale lips.

"Ah, mother," he said, "it is wicked of me to be discontent at my affliction when you and my sister, Leah, do love me so well. But, oh, mother, if I were but strong and whole," and, covering his face with his hands, he sobbed aloud.

"Look up, lad, and dry your tears, for here comes our Leah," cried Ezra.

With an exclamation of joy, Isaac obeyed, and, lifting himself eagerly upon his elbow, watched with joyous eyes, the slow approach of a donkey upon which was seated a maiden.

Ezra went forward and lifted her to the ground.

“Leah, my sister! You are home at last!” cried Isaac.

She ran to the couch and bent over him; his weak arms clasped her neck, his eyes looked lovingly into her face.

The brother and sister had the same fine-cut features and beautiful, soft, dark eyes, but the lad's face was white and pale, while the rich bloom of health colored the cheeks and lips of the maiden. Her dark hair, curly and silken, fell to her waist; she was slenderly built, but erect, graceful and quick of movement.

“What took you so long, my child?” asked Sarah. “Your brother has been fretting, fearing that something had happened to you.”

“I am sorry that you worried, brother,” said the maiden, bending to kiss his pale brow.

“Did you have trouble in disposing of the fruits, Leah?” asked Ezra.

“No, dear father,” replied Leah, turning towards him with a smile. “I was but a little while selling the fruits and making the purchases for my mother.”

“Then it was the slowness of our neighbor's donkey which did delay you,” said Ezra.

“I will tell you, father, why I stayed so long in Samaria,” said the maiden. “They were talking in Samaria of the wonders wrought by the prophet, Elisha, and I lingered to listen. It was of his last miracle that

they spoke. Father, mother, brother, did you know that the prophet, Elisha, has the power to raise the dead to life?"

She paused and turned her eyes upon the helpless form of the cripple lad while the color deepened upon her cheek and her breath came quickly. Isaac spoke not, but, as his eyes met his sister's, they lighted with passionate eagerness and a long, panting sigh left his lips.

"Are you saying that the prophet, Elisha, has the power to raise the dead to life?" cried Ezra, wonderingly and incredulously.

"Yes, father," answered Leah. "Listen, and I will tell to you what I heard in Samaria. There is a woman in Shunem who bore to her husband in his old age a son. This woman, who is charitable and good, is well known to Elisha. Indeed she had prepared a chamber for him in her home where he did rest and take refreshment when he travelled on foot from place to place. One morning, when the woman's child was but five years of age, he went into the field where his father was gathering in the harvest, and, there, he suddenly sickened from the heat of the sun. They carried him to his mother, she held him in her arms and, after some hours, he died. She took him up to the little chamber where the prophet had rested and laid him upon the bed. Then, commanding the servant to saddle a donkey, she set out to seek Elisha who was at Mount Carmel.

"Elisha, standing upon the summit, near the altar of Jehovah, saw her a-far off, and he sent his servant to inquire if all were well with her. But the woman would herself speak with the prophet, and, falling at his feet, did tell him that her son was dead. Elisha then returned with the woman to Shunem and shut himself into the room with the dead child. After a

little while he called his servant and told him to summon the mother, and, when she did come into the room, Elisha said to her, 'Take up your child,' and the child was risen from the dead."

The little maid ceased speaking, and throwing herself on her knees beside the couch, put her arms gently about Isaac's frail form.

"Sister," murmured the lad, touching tenderly with his thin fingers the curling hair which fell upon her shoulders, "I know the thoughts in your tender heart. You are thinking that if this great prophet has power to raise the dead to life, then he also has the power to make strong and straight these poor limbs of mine. Tell me, dear sister, are not these your thoughts?"

"Yes! Indeed, yes!" cried the maiden, in a voice of passionate tenderness and yearning. "But I did not wish you to know what was in my heart until I had spoken with our parents."

She arose and turned towards Ezra and Sarah. Both regarded her in silence; Ezra, pale and grave, Sarah, with tears in her eyes.

"Father, will you give me leave to seek the prophet, Elisha, who dwells in Samaria that I may beg of him to heal my brother?" asked the maiden.

"Do you believe, Leah, that the wonderful things they relate of this Elisha be true?" asked Ezra.

Into the young girls soft eyes there crept a troubled look.

"Oh, dear father do not speak like that," she cried, imploringly. "Surely you know that unless we have faith, nothing will be granted unto us."

Why should you or I doubt the wonders imputed to Elisha, for is he not a holy man of God?"

"You are only a maiden, but you speak words of wisdom which do rebuke your father," said Ezra. "Tell me, my son," turning to Isaac, "do you also believe that this man, Elisha, has power to heal you, who are from your birth a cripple?"

The lad looked, smiling, up into his father's face.

"Yes, father, I do indeed believe that Elisha has power to heal me," he replied. "Even though he had not raised the dead to life still would my faith in him be great, for, as Leah says, he is a holy man of God."

Ezra moved forward and laid his hand on the girl's dark head.

"Your brother also has great faith," he said. "You shall seek Elisha in Samaria and make known to him your desire."

Leah caught her father's hand and raised it to her lips. "Thank you, father," she murmured.

"Do you think that Elisha will listen to your request?" asked Ezra.

"I am sure that he will, for Elisha never turns a deaf ear to the sorrowful and the afflicted," answered Leah. "Father, when may I journey to Samaria and seek the prophet?"

"No, no, have patience, Leah," said Ezra. "We will talk of that later, now it is time to prepare the evening meal. Help your mother, while I go and feed our neighbor's donkey."

He turned away. The sun had set, but a faint flush of crimson still lingered in the west. The donkey stood patiently, with drooping head.

A light flashed out from the low doorway. Ezra, as he fed and watered the tired beast, could see his wife and daughter moving about and also the form of the crippled lad stretched upon the couch. Would that pale cheek ever glow with health? mused Ezra. That weak body be upright and sturdy, those helpless limbs strong and straight?

"From his birth he has been a cripple, sickly and helpless," murmured Ezra. "But surely this man who has power even to raise the dead to life can heal a crippled lad."

"Father! father!" Leah called from the doorway, her cheeks the color of roses, the night breeze lifting her heavy curls, her soft eyes gazing forth into the gathering shadows.

"Come, dear father, the evening meal is ready," she said.

The day's tasks were done. Isaac, exhausted with the emotions and excitement of the day, slept heavily upon his couch. Ezra and Sarah sat in the doorway and the little girl lay upon the ground at their feet, with her curly head resting against her mother's knee.

"Are you tired from your journey, dear?" asked Sarah, touching caressingly Leah's rose-flushed cheek.

"Tired!" repeated the maiden, with a smile. "No, dear mother, your Leah is young and strong; it is only the poor old donkey that is weary."

Ezra sat buried in thought. Now and again the little girl glanced wistfully up into his face. She longed passionately to learn when it was his will for her to seek the prophet in Samaria, but it never occurred to her to question her father or show any signs of impatience.

A silence fell upon the three. Sarah thought that her little girl had fallen asleep, so still she lay, but, as Ezra suddenly roused himself and spoke, Leah, sat upright, her eyes eagerly seeking his face across which the light from within fell.

"Leah," said Ezra, "I have been considering the matter of your seeking the prophet, Elisha, in Samaria. When ten days have passed the fruits will again have ripened; then will I borrow the donkey of our neighbor and you shall journey to Samaria. When you have sold the fruits you can seek the prophet, Elisha."

Leah's eyes filled with tears, her lips quivered, she was bitterly disappointed. To wait ten days when she hoped and longed to start with the coming dawn for Samaria.

"Did you hear me, Leah?" said Ezra, as she did not speak.

"Yes, father," she replied, as she wiped away her tears. "It is your will that I again journey to Samaria when ten days shall have passed."

"Such is my will," said Ezra.

The little girl laid her head again upon her mother's lap and looked, with longing, wistful eyes, into the darkness towards Samaria.

