

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – A HOLIDAY

On their return from their little mission, the Twelve told our Lord all things that they had done and taught.

"Come aside into a desert place and rest a little," He said, for they were tired. It was a welcome invitation. The Lake, which they must cross to reach the desert place, was about the only spot where they could have Him all to themselves, and they had much to tell Him. So they were soon on their way. Look at them all in the boat with Him, bending forward on their oars to catch all He says; speaking to Him, first one, then another; telling Him of their success or failure. See how kindly He looks at them as they speak, how interested He is in all they say. But look! One of them points to the shore. A great crowd is moving slowly round the head of the Lake. The people see the boat is steering for Bethsaida Julius on the eastern side, and are following it on foot along the beach. They will be there first, many of them, for it is only a couple of hours' walk from Capharnaum. The Apostles grumble. The multitude never leaves Him alone, and they had come out for rest. But their Master tells them His disciples must not be selfish. These poor people need Him badly; the sick are being carried all that way, and there are many sad hearts in the crowd. They are ashamed of themselves now as they look at Him, more tired a great deal than they are, yet so kind, so thoughtful for others, so self-forgetting. There is no more murmuring

The boat is run into a little creek, and they get out and follow Him up a mountain side. He sits down, and they seat themselves in a circle on the ground at His feet and listen to Him. They will not have Him long to themselves, the people are coming up in thousands—men, women and children "flocking after Him from all the cities." He watches them from this height and has compassion on them, for they are like sheep without a shepherd. Now He goes down to them and is surrounded at once.

All day He is among them, teaching, healing, comforting. See Him going in and out of the crowd, asking for the sick, laying His hands on them, seeking out those in sorrow and getting them to tell Him their troubles. He has such a tender way of listening. His kind eyes look so interested as the poor and the sick tell their sad tales. And they know by His questions that He really cares to hear and wants to help. What a happy multitude it is around Him all day! The newly cured exulting in the use of eyes and ears and healthy limbs; their friends taking them about, showing them off before the astonished neighbours who had helped to bring them in the morning; the children following our Lord about like a bodyguard, crowding round to watch Him as He heals, so eager, so intent, especially when the blind and the maimed are brought to Him. They love to see the dull, vacant eyes fill with brightness and fix themselves with adoring love and thankfulness on Him who gives them light and sight, and the crippled and the palsied come from under those mighty hands straight and strong. They are His heralds, as well as His guards, these joyous children, for at every fresh cure their shouts and their cheering go out over the crowd and tell where He is. Yes, it has been a happy time; how many hearts have been lightened to-day for having poured their heaviness into His!

But evening is drawing on and the Apostles think it is time to see about food and rest. The crowds have lost count of time, of distance from home, of everything but Jesus. But they cannot stay here for ever. They have had nothing to eat and will have a good two hours' walk before they can find shelter for the night. So the Twelve come to Jesus and say:

"This is a desert place and the hour is now past. Send them away, that going into the next villages and towns they may buy themselves meat to eat." Jesus says to them :

"They have no need to go, give you them to eat." It was like Him to say that, but how can they provide for such a multitude?

"Let us go and buy bread for two hundred pence," they say, "and we will give them to eat."

"How many loaves have you ? He asks. "Go and see." Andrew says to Him:

"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fishes, but what are these among so many?" Jesus answers:

"Bring them hither to Me." See the boy being led by St. Andrew to our Lord; the pride and pleasure of the little fellow as he gives Him his loaves and his fishes; our Lord thanking him for them. A great miracle is going to be wrought, the type of another still greater. It is a solemn moment, and our Lord will have all in order.

"Make the men sit down," He says to the Twelve. They sit down in ranks, by hundreds and by fifties, looking in their bright, many-coloured garments on the green grass like flowerbeds on the turf. And the eyes of all are on the hillock where Jesus stands, the twelve Apostles round Him. He takes the loaves, and, looking up to Heaven, with indescribable majesty, blesses and breaks them, and gives them to the Apostles to be set before the people. And the two fishes He divides among them all. Up and down among the ranks go the Twelve, giving into the eager hands on every side, hearing such cries of wonderment, getting such grateful thanks. Our Lord watches all from His little height, directing the distribution with His hand—an old couple here have been missed; those children over there are ready for more. When all have had enough, He says to the Apostles:

"Gather up the fragments that remain lest they be lost." And they fill twelve baskets with what is left after that multitude is satisfied—five thousand hungry men, besides women and children. Our Lord and the disciples take some of the fragments for their own meal. Whilst they are eating, a great cry is heard and taken up by the whole multitude:

"This is the Christ! This is of a truth the Prophet that is to come into the world! Hosanna to the King of Israel!"

The Apostles are delighted. The long-expected Kingdom is coming at last! And they join in the joyful shout. But their rejoicing is short. Their Master tells them to go home now across the Lake whilst He stays behind to dismiss the crowd. What a woeful disappointment! Their faces show their dismay. It is such a pity to go just now when the people are in such good dispositions. May not some of them stay—Peter and James and John—to help Him with the crowd? No, they must all go. Very reluctantly they obey, all the more so as there is a storm-cloud gathering and the wind is rising. They have not forgotten that storm when they came from Gadara. However, there is no help for it, so they get into the boat and push off.

Waving their arms and shouting, the people come round our Lord. He must be their King, and they will fight

for Him and die for Him if need be. But He tells them He does not want to be an earthly King, and they must be quiet and go back to their homes and think of all He has taught them. There is no resisting the gentle gravity and authority with which He speaks; the cries die down, and before long they are all on their way home, a joyful, peaceful army, but the King and Leader left behind. Where? When the crowds have all gone, He goes with weary feet up the mountain side again—to pray. Before choosing His Apostles He spent the night in prayer. And now, on this night, before the great Promise He is to make on the morrow, He prays. This is His custom always. He teaches, heals, comforts, makes Himself all to all. And then He seeks a quiet time and place for prayer, to teach us that however busy our lives may be, however full of work for others, we must keep time for being alone with God in prayer. We notice when and where He prays, and find another lesson for ourselves. We cannot indeed pray at night under the quiet stars on a still mountain side; but as far as possible we should choose an hour and a spot where we shall not be distracted, and where we shall not distract ourselves. As He prayed the wind rose higher and higher, and at length the storm broke in all its fury upon the Lake. Woe to the fishing craft out that night! Peter's boat in the midst of the sea was tossed about and could not make head against the violence of the wind and waves.

In vain did its crew furl the sail and bale out the water and row their best. It was plain to them that they would never see land. Oh, why had the Master sent them away from Him! It was foolish to be frightened the other day with Him in the boat, but now they were alone and He had forgotten them. St. John, who was there, wrote long after of that dreadful night: "It was now dark and Jesus was not come unto them." They were clinging to the sides of the boat as the sea rose and fell, when, suddenly—a Form was seen in the distance, a human Form, and It was coming towards them. Seamen are very superstitious, easily frightened by what they take to be spectres, or evil omens. But here was no imagination. It was plainly a Man and He was walking on the sea.

"It is an apparition!" they said, and they cried out for fear. For they all saw Him and were troubled. And immediately He spoke with them across the waves, saying:

"Be of good heart; it is I, fear ye not." Oh, what a change, what joy and peace and comfort came to them with those words:

"It is I!" A few moments and He would be with them. But Peter could not wait. His Master was there; he must go to Him at once.

"Lord," he cried, "if it be Thou, bid me come to Thee upon the waters."

And Jesus said :

"Come!" In an instant Peter's foot was over the side of the boat and down on the waves that grew firm beneath his tread. Up and down he walked on the heaving sea, - his eyes fixed on Jesus, the Eleven leaning over the side of the boat watching him in breathless silence. He is only a few steps from our Lord when a tremendous wave almost overthrows him. He looks round, loses sight of Jesus, gets afraid and begins to sink.

"Lord, save me!" he cries, and flings out his arms towards his Master. And Jesus immediately stretching out His hand takes hold of him and says:

"O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?" And Peter, clinging to Jesus, comes safe to the boat, and as soon as they are inside the wind ceases. The disciples come up and fall at our Lord's feet and adore Him, saying:

"Indeed, Thou art the Son of God!" And He works yet another miracle, "for presently the ship was at the land to which they were going."