

Keys to Heaven

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a great and mighty king, ruling over many lands. All the treasures of the earth were his and all day he played with the precious stones of Ophir and the roses of Damascus as though they were trifles. However, with all his riches he lacked one thing—*The Keys to the Gates of Heaven*.

Thousands of messengers he had sent out into the world to find the keys to heaven, but not one of them was able to fetch them. Many a wise man coming to his court he had asked where the keys to heaven were to be found, but none had known the answer. But one, a man from India with strange eyes, smilingly brushed aside the precious stones of Ophir and the roses of Damascus with which the king was wont to play and told him that all the treasures of the earth could be had as a present, but the keys to heaven each one had to find for himself.

Then the king decided to find the keys to heaven, whatever the cost. Now this was at a time when mankind was still able to see where heaven extended down unto the earth and everybody was familiar with the high mountain on the summit of which the gates of heaven had been built. The king ordered his courtiers to remain at home and started to climb the steep mountain until he reached the gates to heaven. Before the gates, whose battlements were flooded with the brightest sunlight, stood the Angel Gabriel, the guardian of God's eternal garden.

"Glorious One," said the king, "all the treasures on earth are mine. Many are the lands that must pay me tribute and I amuse myself playing with the



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precious stones of Ophir and the roses of Damascus. Yet I will not be at ease until I also have the keys to heaven in my possession. For how else will its portal open to me some day?"

"That is verily the truth," said the Angel Gabriel, "without the keys to heaven you will never open its portals, even if you were in possession of all the arts and treasures of earth. But how easy it is to find the keys to heaven! They bloom in ever so many little flowers when it is spring on earth, and they bloom in the souls of every creature.

"What!" exclaimed the king, very much surprised, "Is that all I have to do, just gather a little flower? The meadows and woods are full of them and everywhere you go you step on them."

"It is true that people tread the many pretty keys to heaven under foot," said the Angel. "However, as easy as *you* think, it was not meant. There are

just three keys that will unlock the gates to heaven, and all three of them are only truly yours if they spring up at your feet—and for you. All the many other thousands of primroses that bloom on earth, which in fairyland are known as the keys to heaven, simply act as reminders for you to make the real keys to heaven bloom, for *those* are the flowers that everybody is stepping on.”

Just then a little child appeared before the gates of heaven. In its hand were three flower-keys which were like blossoms of light. Now, as the child touched the gates of heaven with the three flower-keys, the portals opened wide and the Angel Gabriel led it into heaven. But the gates closed again and the king stood alone before the closed gates. Then he walked thoughtfully down the mountain back to earth. Everywhere fields and meadows were full of the most beautiful, golden keys to heaven. The king was very cautious not to step on any, but not one of the flowers sprang up at his feet.

“Should I not be able to find the true keys to heaven,” the king asked himself, “when a little child succeeded in finding them?” But he did not find them and many years passed.

Now it happened one day as he was leaving his castle in the company of his courtiers, who were arrayed in great splendor, that a dirty, neglected child, having neither father nor mother, sat begging by the wayside.

“Ah, let her beg elsewhere,” said the servants, pushing her aside as she approached the king with outstretched hand.

During all the years since the king had come down from the mountain he had given the flower-keys to heaven much thought and had been very careful never to step on any. He lifted the dirty beggar-child up and set her before him on his horse and took her home to his castle. When they arrived he ordered the child to be nourished and prettily dressed and he himself fostered and adorned it and placed a small crown upon its head.

Then there sprang up at his feet a little golden key to heaven. Whereupon the king proclaimed that throughout his realm all the poor and all the children were to be his brothers.

After many years had passed the king one day

rode out into the woods with his nobles. Seeing a sick and injured wolf he dismounted and found that the beast was helpless and unable to move. “Oh, let him die,” said the courtiers, stepping between the king and the miserable creature. But the king placed the poor animal in one of the carts and when he had arrived home he took the wolf in his arms and carried it into the palace. There he nursed him daily until he had restored him to health again.

From that day the wolf followed him wherever he went. Then the second golden key to heaven bloomed at the king’s feet. He thereupon declared that all the creatures in his kingdom were his younger brothers.

Again the years rolled by—but not as many as before when the key to heaven bloomed for him—and it happened that as he wandered one day in his great garden, he rejoiced to behold the many rare and beautiful plants and flowers so artistically and thoughtfully cared for, making his garden the most splendid in all the lands of the kingdom. Glancing down the king beheld at the border of the path an ugly looking plant that was almost wilted in the burning sun, its dusty leaves drooping with thirst.

“I am going to fetch some water,” said the king. But the gardener restrained him. “It is as ugly as a weed,” he said. “Let me pull it out and burn it. There is no room for such as this in your royal garden with all its flowery loveliness.”

But the king doffed his golden helmet, filled it with fresh water at the spring and took it to the plant. The plant drank it up and began to breathe and live and thrive anew.

Then the third key to heaven bloomed at the feet of the king while the little beggar maiden and the wolf were looking on. On an impulse the king looked up the steep mountain and saw the gates of heaven opening wide. In the radiant light of the Sun which flooded its battlements stood the Angel Gabriel and the little child that had already found the way to heaven that time long, long ago.

The three keys to heaven are still blooming today and they shine even brighter and more beautiful than all the precious stones of Ophir and all the roses of Damascus. □

—Manfred Kyber