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Rodolph and his King.



RODOLPH AND HIS KING.

"Tell me, Father," said the child at Rodolph's knee,— "tell me of the king."

"There is no king, my child," said Rodolph. "What you have heard are old women's tales. Do not believe them, for there is no king."

"But why, then," queried the child, "do all the people praise and call on him; why do the birds sing of the king; and why do the brooks always prattle his name, as they dance from the hills to the sea?"

"Nay," answered Rodolph, "you imagine these things; there is no king. Believe me, child, there is no king."

So spake Rodolph; but scarcely had he uttered the words when the cricket in the chimney corner chirped loudly, and his shrill notes seemed to say: "The king—the king." Rodolph could hardly believe his ears. How had the cricket learned to chirp these words? It was beyond all understanding. But still the cricket chirped, and still his musical monotone seemed to say, "The king—the king," until, with an angry frown, Rodolph strode from his house, leaving the child to hear the cricket's song alone.

But there were other voices to remind Rodolph of the king. The sparrows were fluttering under the eaves, and they twittered noisily as Rodolph strode along, "The king, king, king!" "The king, king, king," twittered the sparrows, and their little tones were full of gladness and praise.

A thrush sat in the hedge, and she was singing her morning song. It was a hymn of praise,—how beautiful it was! "The king—the king—the king," sang the thrush, and she sang, too, of his goodness,—it was a wondrous song, and it was all about the king.

The doves cooed in the elm-trees. "Sing to us!" cried their little ones, stretching out their pretty heads from the nests. Then the doves nestled hard by and murmured lullabies, and the lullabies were of the king who watched over and protected even the little birds in their nests.

Rodolph heard these things, and they filled him with anger.

"It is a lie!" muttered Rodolph; and in great petulance he came to the brook.

How noisy and romping the brook was; how capricious, how playful, how furtive! And how he called to the willows and prattled to the listening grass as he scampered on his way. But Rodolph turned aside and his face grew darker. He did not like the voice of the brook; for, lo! just as the cricket had chirped and the birds had sung, so did this brook murmur and prattle and sing ever of the king, the king, the king.

So, always after that, wherever Rodolph went, he heard voices that told him of the king; yes, even in their quiet, humble way, the flowers seemed to whisper the king's name, and every breeze that fanned his brow had a tale to tell of the king and his goodness.

"But there is no king!" cried Rodolph. "They all conspire to plague me! There is no king—there is no king!"

Once he stood by the sea and saw a mighty ship go sailing by. The waves plashed on the shore and told stories to the pebbles and the sands. Rodolph heard their thousand voices, and he heard them telling of the king.

Then a great storm came upon the sea, a tempest such as never before had been seen. The waves dashed mountain-high and overwhelmed the ship, and the giant voices of the winds and waves cried of the king, the king! The sailors strove in agony till all seemed lost. Then, when they could do no more, they stretched out their hands and called upon the king to save them,—the king, the king, the king!

Rodolph saw the tempest subside. The angry winds were lulled, and the mountain waves sank into sleep, and the ship came safely into port. Then the sailors sang a hymn of praise, and the hymn was of the king and to the king.

"But there is no king!" cried Rodolph. "It is a lie; there is no king!"

Yet everywhere he went he heard always of the king; the king's name and the king's praises were on every tongue; aye, and the things that had no voices seemed to wear the king's name written upon them, until Rodolph neither saw nor heard

anything that did not mind him of the king.

Then, in great anger, Rodolph said: "I will go to the mountain-tops; there I shall find no birds, nor trees, nor brooks, nor flowers to prate of a monarch no one has ever seen. There shall there be no sea to vex me with its murmurings, nor any human voice to displease me with its superstitions."

So Rodolph went to the mountains, and he scaled the loftiest pinnacle, hoping that there at last he might hear no more of that king whom none had ever seen. And as he stood upon the pinnacle, what a mighty panorama was spread before him, and what a mighty anthem swelled upon his ears! The peopled plains, with their songs and murmurings, lay far below; on every side the mountain peaks loomed up in snowy grandeur; and overhead he saw the sky, blue, cold, and cloudless, from horizon to horizon.

What voice was that which spoke in Rodolph's bosom then as Rodolph's eyes beheld this revelation?

"There is a king!" said the voice. "The king lives, and this is his abiding-place!"

And how did Rodolph's heart stand still when he felt Silence proclaim the king,—not in tones of thunder, as the tempest had proclaimed him, nor in the singing voices of the birds and brooks, but so swiftly, so surely, so grandly, that Rodolph's soul was filled with awe ineffable.

Then Rodolph cried: "There is a king, and I acknowledge him! Henceforth my voice shall swell the songs of all in earth and air and sea that know and praise his name!"

So Rodolph went to his home. He heard the cricket singing of the king; yes, and the sparrows under the eaves, the thrush in the hedge, the doves in the elms, and the brook, too, all singing of the king; and Rodolph's heart was gladdened by their music. And all the earth and the things of the earth seemed more beautiful to Rodolph now that he believed in the king; and to the song all Nature sang Rodolph's voice and Rodolph's heart made harmonious response.

"There *is* a king, my child," said Rodolph to his little one. "Together let us sing to him, for he is *our* king, and his goodness abideth forever and forever."

1885

[End of *Rodolph and his King* by Eugene Field]