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Our Lady at Home

RICHARD T. A. MURPHY, O.P.

Number 31

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

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Father Murphy did some of his studies in Rome, and his special scripture work at the famous school of St. Stephen in Jerusalem, working under the world-renowned scholar Pere Lagrange, O. P. His book, *The Psalms of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin*, was published in 1953.

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OUR LADY AT HOME

RICHARD T. A. MURPHY, O.P.

I should like to give the reader a better picture of the Blessed Virgin and her family in their Galilean home. If Jesus, Mary and Joseph could be induced to step from those pretty holy-cards, what would they be like?

THE SETTING

The Holy Family lived in Galilee, the northern part of the Holy Land (Palestine). The New Yorkers and Bostonians of the day looked upon Galilee as very definitely being "the sticks," an attitude which is reflected in the gospel, in the incident of Nicodemus. When he urged his colleagues to consider the case of Christ with greater calm, he was promptly put in his place with a heated "Art thou also a Galilean? Search the Scriptures and see that out of Galilee a prophet riseth not" (John 7, 52). True enough; Galilee was referred to as the "Galilee of the Gentiles," and as for Nazareth, it was not mentioned even once in all the Old Testament. Everybody, of course, will remember the rather abrupt way Saint Peter was treated, when his rustic Galilean twang betrayed him as a northerner.

But no matter how they sneered at Galilee and the Galileans, Galilee was and still is not only one of the most beautiful sections of Palestine, but also one of the most fertile. Galilee in the spring is utterly charming, for nowhere else over there do flowers grow in such profusion. The hillsides are adorned with gardens and orchards in which almonds, pomegranates, figs, olives, lemons and oranges grow. Scattered amid these fragrant fruit-trees are tall, dark cypresses, and today, the modern hedges of grotesque prickly-pears. There is no time or space to elaborate here on the beauty of the Sea of Galilee, where Our Lord spent so much of His time, but it contributes its share to the beauty of Galilee, as anyone who has ever visited it will agree.

Along the southern border of Galilee, which runs (roughly) from Haifa to a point slightly south of the Sea of Galilee, there extends the Plain of Esdraelon. It boasts of the richest soil in all Palestine, and produces excellent wheat and barley. As a matter of fact, all Galilee was so fertile, and its fruit and fish industries so profitable, that the Horace Greeley's of the time said: "If you want to get rich, young man, go north (with apologies to H.G.), but if it's learning you're after, you have to go south (that is, to Jerusalem)."

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THE PEOPLE

The Galileans—and all the Apostles except Judas were Galileans—were as a rule a rough, hard-working people, simple but very independent. Honor meant more to them than riches, and the famous Jewish historian Josephus says of them: "The Galileans are warlike from childhood, and very numerous. Cowardice is a plague which never afflicts their men, nor depopulation their country." We get the picture of a people alert and ready to defend themselves and their rights. Such people are admirable, for the most part, but at times such qualities seem almost a pre-disposition to excess. At any rate, it was in fair Galilee that a violent faction called the Zealots originated, which may prove that environment isn't everything.

Pausing on the brow of a hill overlooking the Plain of Esdraelon, one can easily pick out Naim and Endor snuggling at the foot of the southern foothills. Mount Tabor looms up close by, and to the north, the snowy brow of Mount Hermon can be seen peering into the Promised Land. It comes as a start to realize that this same scene often filled the eyes of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

NAZARETH

But Galilee's fairest ornament is Nazareth, where Our Lord lived for thirty years before beginning His public ministry. It is a few miles north of the plains, and it is built along the side of a hill, a fact which has architectural consequences, as we shall see. The modern visitor to the Holy Land is quickly accustomed to the sight of sun-dried brick walls and houses, but Nazareth today boasts many homes of white limestone, and some of these, nestling amid the cypresses and vineyards on the upper hillside, set one to thinking of a villa of his own some day. But by far the greater number of homes are the usual thing—with drab, earth-colored walls, built along narrow streets which angle sharply upwards (you can imagine how sharply the rain washes down them in winter), and huddled together for meagre comfort.

LIVING IN A CAVE

The Franciscans are the official "Custodians of the Holy Places," and have rebuilt the old Crusader church over the home of the Holy Family. When this project was under way, a great number of caves, adapted for use as human dwellings, were discovered in the vicinity. As a matter of fact, the church is built over the traditional *grotto* of the Annunciation, which served as home of the Holy Family. In its original state, of course, it may have been extended by the addition of a roof and walls. There is no stigma attached to living in a cave. The poor whom we have always with us have always had to live

where they could, and many a displaced Arab of today would settle for a cave in preference to the tents under which he now lives. In Italy too, the poor live where they can, and some of them use the arches of the ancient aqueducts in the building of their humble abodes.

Within the cave-dwelling of the Holy Family there were, naturally, none of our modern switches, no electric-stoves or refrigerators, not even any plumbing. Light was furnished by a flickering oil-lamp, and all water had to be brought in from the one spring in the village. Beds? Only a quilt or two which could be rolled up and put out of the way during the day.

COOKING WITH MARY

In this home, as in all homes of all ages, food had to be prepared and eaten, for hunger is no sin, and Our Lord knew what hunger was. Suppose we were to help the Blessed Virgin prepare a meal? What would she serve, how would she prepare it, and where?

The common fare in the Holy Land has undoubtedly remained much the same down through the centuries. Mary would dip into the earthenware jars, used as a pantry for flour and other things that could be stored away. From them might appear small and black olives, cucumbers and a few other vegetables, sometimes an egg or two, and pungent cheeses made from goatsmilk. There would be bread, baked every day like a huge pancake on a hot iron, or in the ashes. There might be fish from Tiberias, and perhaps mutton or veal on rare occasions. Water and wine would help wash down this frugal meal. For dessert, nuts and fruit.

How was the food prepared? In their dwelling there was not much room, surely not enough for a separate kitchen. The fire was probably built out of doors, except for the rainy season (November to March) when it was near the door of the cave. As chimneys were unknown in those days, and the wind sometimes blew in the wrong direction, the cave was undoubtedly filled with smoke, and eyes with tears. Cooking was done over the fire, or in the ashes, or in a crude kind of clay oven. Dishes were limited pretty much to the clay pots things were cooked in. Fingers before forks, they say. After centuries of living, forks are still few and far between there, and food is conveyed to the mouth by picking it up in strips of their thin, pancake-like bread.

The fact that Saint Joseph was a carpenter took care of the matter of firewood rather handily, but if there was one thing that Mary took care of herself, it was the water-supply of the home. That is traditionally the woman's job. Today, as then, one has only to lift up his eyes to see the women of the

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land striding gracefully along in their long black dresses, front and hem embroidered brightly, hands swinging free and—almost unbelievably (for an occidental)—with a jar of water balanced securely upon their heads.

The Fountain of the Virgin is one of the show-places of Nazareth because of its association with the Blessed Virgin. Here is Nazareth's only source of water, only a short walk from the heart of town. Here Mary came several times a day, only then the water did not flow out of pipes, as it does today, and the ground underfoot must often have been muddy.

Fire, food, water, jars, mud—all these prompt an interesting number of questions. Did Mary every drop and break her jar, or spill water on herself or others, were her feet and clothing ever muddied, and did she ever burn the supper?

A CONSTANT STATE OF MIRACLES?

There is one school of thought that would deny that any of these things were even possible in her case, on the ground that her extraordinary sanctity and high place in God's affections would put her above such things. What seems to slip them, however, is that in such a case she would be a very un-human kind of person. In the infinite detail of daily living, one may avoid each and every accident, but not all of them over a long period of time. We are under no obligation to believe that Mary lived in a constant state of miracle. Nor do we have to believe that when the Holy Family fled to Egypt, the palm trees bent down and offered her their fruit, or the fish in the stream offered themselves to be eaten, or that the waters ceased their flowing so that they could cross over dry-shod. Not at all. If they wanted to eat, they had to do as ordinary folk do under the circumstances; if they wanted to cross the streams, they either had to wade or to look for a bridge. Later on, Christ would send the Apostles to the neighboring town to look for food, instead of miracle-ing a dinner for them out of the air. Why should the home at Nazareth be considered an assembly-line of miracles?

The point I'm trying to make is that such things as breaking dishes can be quite independent of, and in no way affect, a person's sanctity, like a host of other things. Take Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, admittedly a great saint. But he was afraid every time he saw lightning. And why should he not have been, when his twin sister had been killed by it as he and she lay in their cradle. He never quite got over this.

At any rate, I hope we can proceed on the assumption that Mary occasionally did break a few jars—though not by throwing them; that she got her

hands and feet dirty, and that she burned her fingers and, as a result, the dinner. Not through carelessness, of course, but because open fires are hot, and the handles on those old pots were not all that they are today. If she burned her fingers, she would almost automatically pop them into her mouth, because that is what people do when they burn their fingers. A heated pot would not stop being hot for all that it was touched by the Mother of God.

Then we can imagine Our Lord and Saint Joseph expressing concern over the burnt fingers, and perhaps even playfully complaining about the way the cook was spoiling a working-man's supper—just to lighten the atmosphere. And Mary, blushing a bit, would smile, understanding full well the love that lay behind this gentle raillery. It was after all a real family, not a solemn religious procession or pageant. Jesus had to "experience" the joys of good conversation, of exchange of views. If ever a home should have been outstanding for its light-hearted talk, it was this one.

VISITORS

It would be rather silly to suppose that the Holy Family lived in a vacuum, even in an incomplete vacuum. All three had very real bodies, hands, feet, tongues. They went places, spoke to people, were seen by them. And they had visitors.

Hospitality in the Near East can be a rather violent affair. In the story of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, for example, Saint Luke tells us that they "pressed Christ to stay with them." Given the enthusiastic character of orientals, that expression "they pressed him" is certainly somewhat euphemistic. On the other hand along with this hospitality there is a rather keen sense of fraternity, a willingness to speak one's mind, to offer advice, and so on.

Some of the people who dropped in on the little home at Nazareth came on business. Joseph was a carpenter, and surely repaired many a plow, many a yoke, hoe and axe-handle. One likes to think that he excelled in making cradles, a specialty of Nazareth. His workshop was probably the ground near the door (or in winter, just inside the door, where he could use the light). There was the sound of hatchet, saw, hammer, chisel, drill, and over all, the good clean smell of wood. Best of all, at his side was Jesus, "learning a trade" (as most rabbis did) while helping his foster-father. And also listening with gravity to the hagglers who, *beyond any shadow of a doubt*, argued with Saint Joseph about the price of his work. Orientals love to bargain; it is not only a way of passing the time, but it sometimes leads to a brilliant victory in a battle of wits, and sometimes means money saved. But if Joseph

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encountered anyone who tried to cheat him—and there were probably some who did—then that “just man” certainly must have gone after the cheater, hot with just anger. After all, he had mouths to feed besides his own.

WOMAN'S TALK

Women would come there too, exchange a few words with Joseph and his helper, and then would disappear into the house, or draw aside with Mary as she did her work out-of-doors. It would be woman's talk, of course, about babies, food, embroidery, the high cost of living, and taxes. It must have been easy to talk to Mary, busied though she kept herself with cooking, or sewing, or weaving. Her quiet brown eyes seemed turned inward, somehow, as if looking at some treasured memory; but her visitors would not be neglected. It was also oddly impossible for people to speak or even think much evil in her presence. She seemed to create a different kind of atmosphere, one in which such words or thoughts died unspoken.

Among the visitors would be the relatives, those “brothers and sisters of Jesus” and their fathers and mothers. A non-Catholic friend once asked me how it was that “so few Catholics know that Christ had brothers and sisters?” Well, it is an ascertainable fact that the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and their contemporaries, was in reality a rather poor language, because in it the word “brother” was used to express many relationships: uncle and nephew, cousin, real brother. The “brothers and sisters of Jesus” mentioned in the gospel were His kinsmen, His cousins.

“YOU CAN'T HELP YOUR RELATIVES”

Now in the Near East, relatives are relatives, often a vociferous lot, and not wholly unacquainted with inquisitiveness. It requires no great exercise of the imagination to picture them giving Joseph advice on how to run his business, making helpful (?) suggestions how to do his work. After Joseph's death, Jesus (Who wore no halo or other distinguishng mark, and Who was to all appearances only a carpenter's son) was undoubtedly singled out for these attentions. There must have been many occasions when both Jesus and Mary were obliged to parry questions that were indiscreet, too personal. But why get mad about such behavior; relatives are relatives all over the world!

Mary had her bad days too. Joseph shared in one such day, when the Christ Child was lost in Jerusalem, but Mary was alone when Christ grew up and began to go about preaching His message concerning the Kingdom of God. No doubt His relatives must have thought Him unfaithful to family tradition, and said so. No doubt either of the close watch they kept on Him,

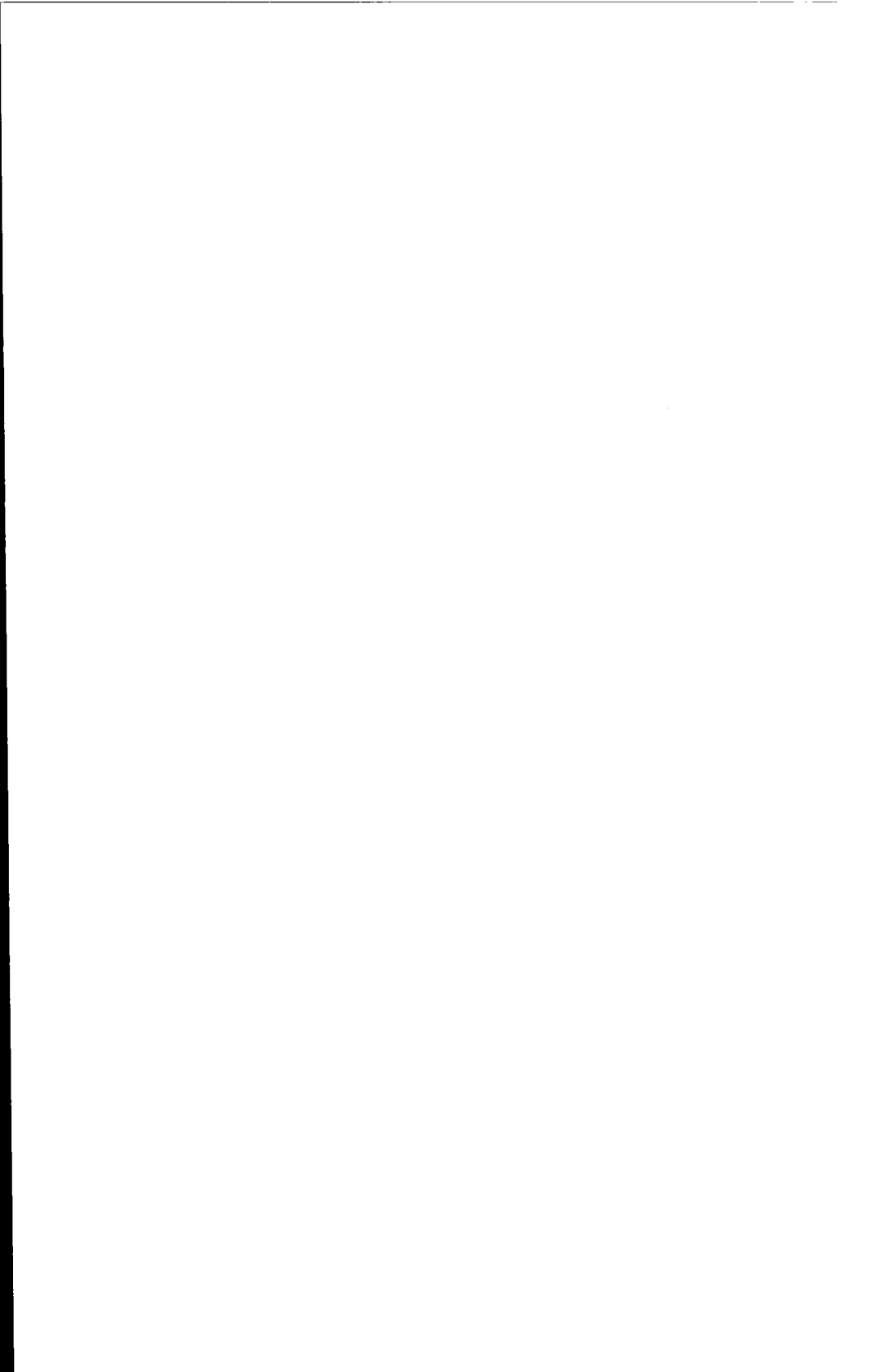
for when He returned from Capharnaum, fresh from His first triumphs, they were quick to voice a sharp reproof: "He is outside himself." They thought He might harm Himself by His enthusiasm, that He needed to be watched, counselled, directed. Into whose ears would these criticisms be poured? Into Mary's of course.

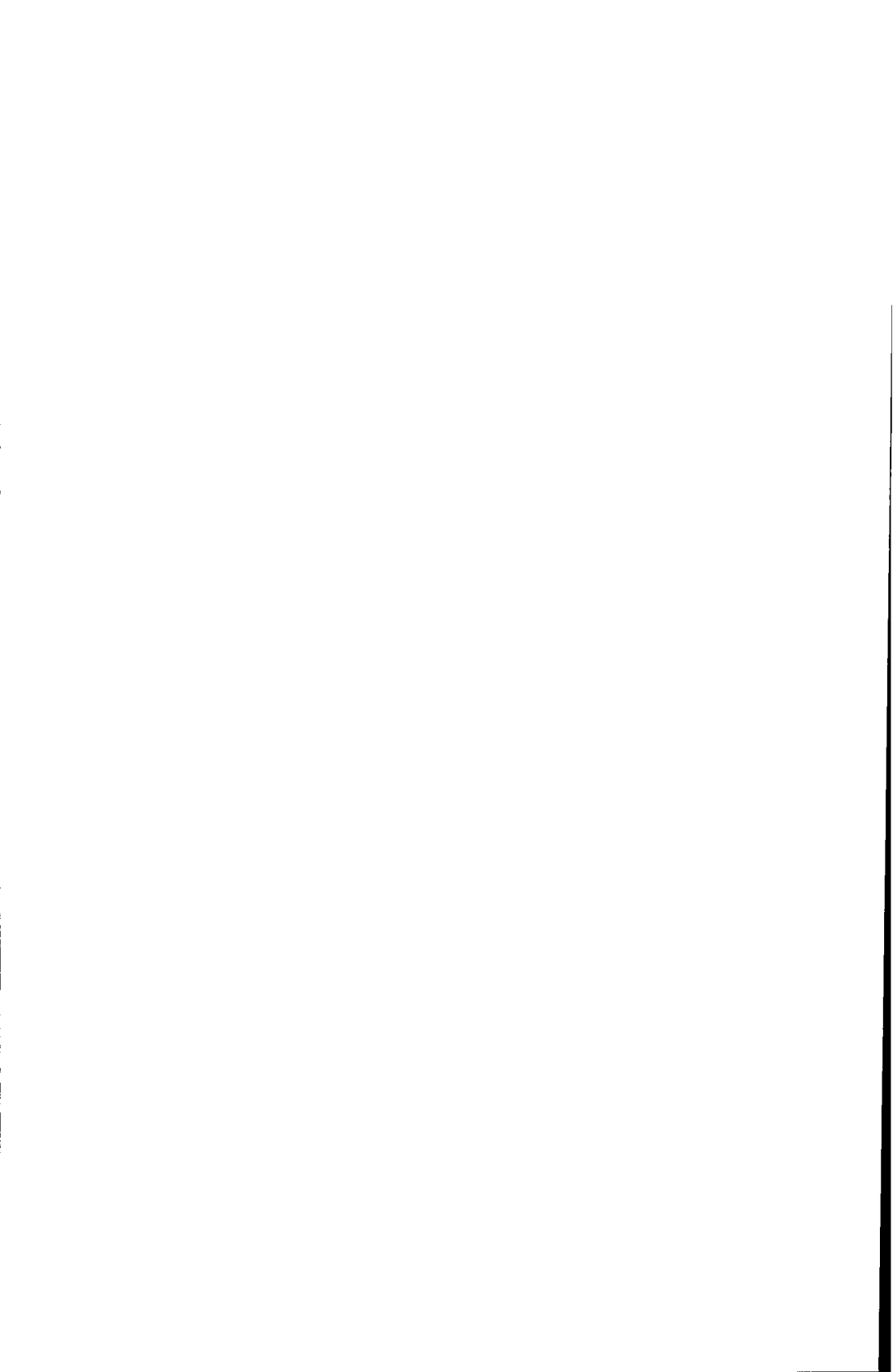
REJECTED BY HIS OWN

But it was not only the relatives. When a man lives in a small town for thirty years his fellow-townsmen know him well, or think they do. One day Christ, now become a preacher of some renown, surprised them into violent anger. He read aloud a passage of Isaias in the synagogue, and then, putting aside the scroll, calmly declared that "these words were *written of Me.*" The gospel merely records, with admirable restraint, that all in the synogogue were filled with wrath, and rose up and cast Him out of town; and brought Him to the brow of the hill upon which their town was built, *that they might cast Him down headlong.* Nothing is said in this report of violence of Mary's anxiety on the occasion, but we can easily surmise that it was in proportion to her love for her Son.

THE DAILY GRIND

Thus from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Jerusalem, God did not exempt His loved ones from hard work and the difficulties of life. There was no raven to bring the daily bread, as once was done for Elias; angels abounded in the humble home, but they "kept their place," and the Holy Family worked. Day after day of little things, insignificant things, ordinary living, of prayers said together, acts of thoughtfulness, unselfish acts, loving ones. Uninteresting? Perhaps, but then so too is a mosaic if one only looks at the bits of stone, and fails to see the beautiful picture emerging from the apparently unimportant pieces. At Nazareth, God saw the beauty of the picture; unseeing men saw only the scattered details. What is most important, for them as for us, is that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph just didn't talk a good life, they *lived* it.





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