

THE CHILD'S CRUSADE

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The Child's Crusade by William Hale Beckford

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WILLIAM HALE BECKFORD

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CRUSADE**

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THE CHILD'S CRUSADE

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THE WAND DRILL—WORK AND PLAY

THE CHILD'S CRUSADE

BY

WILLIAM HALE BECKFORD

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THE CALL OF THE CHILD.

Foreword

"YEA," SAITH HOLY STEPHEN, "WE SHALL CONQUER WHERE OUR FATHERS HAVE FAILED. BEFORE US THE WATERS SHALL DIVIDE; THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM SHALL FALL DOWN, AS DID THOSE OF JERICHO BEFORE JOSHUA. THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S; LET US FOLLOW HIS BANNER, AND WE SHALL SURELY DRIVE THE PAYNIM FROM THE HOLY LAND."

Such the stirring appeal that rang through France and Western Europe in the early summer of 1212, year of grace. At Easter the swift vision had come to Stephen of Cloyes, a fourteen-year-old lad, as he tended his sheep on a hillside in the Loire valley.

In the afternoon shadows there stood before him a dark pilgrim form, with garments dust-stained from a long journey. To the boy's eager thought the pilgrim drew a sad picture of the Christians in Palestine and the sepulchre in Moslem hands. Then he bade Stephen summon all the children to renew the crusade their fathers had foresworn.

As, with his fiery message, Stephen sped through the land, tacit approval of both church and king was given the boy-prophet. He soon marshalled on the plain of Vendome an army of near forty thousand children, most of them between eight and fifteen. Then they marched down the Rhone valley, singing joyous psalms and with banners a gleam.

Many of the tots fell by the way—to starve and die—but the ranks were soon filled with new recruits. Upon reaching Marseilles the children halted for a time at the edge of the sea, while Stephen prayed that the

waters might divide and yield them safe passage to the Holy Land.

Meanwhile, at Cologne, a second army about as large as the first, had gathered from Germany and the Low Country. A ten-year lad, Nicholas, essayed to lead it up the course of the Rhine and across the Alps to Italy. Within a few weeks more than half the band were strewn among the passes and defiles, frozen or torn by wild beasts, while an alien people looked on—unmoved.

A third of this army pressed through to the Lombard plains, where the girls and most of the boys were soon lost in the slews of the medieval towns. Of the survivors who reached Rome and were told by Pope Innocent III to turn back and wait until they were grown up—then fulfill their vows—it is said that a few hundred saw their homes again.

After vain waiting for the waters to divide Stephen's army also began to melt away. At that moment two strange merchants from Marseilles appeared, who offered to transport the children across the sea in seven ready vessels. Hailing this as a miracle, five thousand went gaily on board, but they never reached Palestine. Taken direct to Algiers and Egypt, the young crusaders were sold as slaves to the Moslems they went forth to conquer. Thirty years later one surviving priest, who had been with the band, returned and bore witness to their fate.

A brief relieving touch is given this dark picture by the record that, some years after the children disappeared, Frederick of Sicily captured the two slave traders—who bore the portentous names of Hugo Ferreus (Iron-Handed) and William Porcus (the Swine)—and hung them, as pirates, from the yard arm of their own vessel.

So this army of children vanished with hopes unfulfilled. In the black-letter-chronicles of the day one can easily discern traces of the same superstition, cruel indifference and greed that have embittered childhood at all periods. It was similar fanaticism that led Hindu mothers, even until recent times, to cast their offspring to sacred crocodiles in the Ganges. This fanaticism inspired the priests of Moloch to throw year-old infants, expiating parental sins, into the fiery breast of their god. The chosen people themselves did not hesitate to dash the young of their enemy upon the stones; while among the cultured of Greece and Rome the exposure of helpless and decrepit children to wild beasts was a common practice.

THE NEW VISION

Another and larger vision of the rights of childhood came to thoughtful minds in the early part of the last century. As the revolutionary tides subsided, it dawned upon social workers of England and the Continent that there could be no permanent reforms so long as the child-life of the nation was crushed in mines and factories, or defiled in the city slums.

Out of this agitation to rescue the oppressed children grew more just and sane factory laws, accident and old-age pensions, with better conditions for men and women workers, not alone in England, but Europe as well.

As this movement to safeguard children took definite form, Mrs. Browning, in 1842, wrote its Declaration.

Her appeal:—

"Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrows come with years?"