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Ten Boys from History

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PREFACE

In this small volume the boys of many lands and races whose stories are told, have been selected not because they later became famous men, although some of them did, but because each one achieved something noteworthy as a boy. And in each boy's character, whether historic or legendary, courage was the marked trait. For this reason it is hoped that their stories will prove stimulating to some who read them.

K. D. S.

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TEN BOYS FROM HISTORY

STEPHEN AND NICHOLAS:

Boy Crusaders

"To the sea of fools
Led the path of the children."

Old Epigram.

Just a word about the Crusades, or Holy Wars, before we begin our story.

A war is generally a conflict between nations, countries, or individuals, for possession of land or a throne, but the Holy Wars were not such. They were expeditions made by those Christians who were determined to rescue the Sepulchre, or tomb, of Christ and the City of Jerusalem, from the rule of unbelievers.

For eighty-eight years Christian kings ruled in Palestine, then all the land was conquered by the Mohammedans, except a few cities, and the Christians sent out another, and still another, and another expedition to subdue the enemy, but all were useless. The Holy City and the Holy Sepulchre were still in the hands of infidels, who persecuted the pilgrims who visited the Holy Tomb; and the Christians sent a heart-rending cry to all Europe for help, but Europe was slow to answer the appeal, and it was several years after Pope Innocent ordered a new Crusade, before an army departed for the scene of conflict.

It was during this interval that the Children's Crusade or Holy War, took place—of which we are about to read.

But first let us go back to the city of Chartres, on the 25th day of April, 1212, when a surging crowd of men and women is filling every street and by-way of the quaint city.

What are the crowds watching so eagerly? A procession of priests and laymen, carrying banners and black-draped crosses, and chanting in solemn unison as they march.

It is the day of the celebration in Chartres of the "Black Crosses," an old church ceremony instituted centuries before, by Gregory the Great, during the ravages of the Plague, but now celebrated as an

appeal to the people to free Jerusalem and the Holy Tomb from the hands of the infidels.

The solemn ranks of the procession move slowly through the streets of Chartres, carrying black-draped symbols of a Saviour's death, chanting deep-toned litanies, and that the old ceremony has lost none of its emotional power is shown by the tears and silence of the watching throngs, while among all the crowd none is more profoundly stirred than a slender shepherd lad from the neighbouring town of Cloyes, who is seeing the ceremony for the first time.

Agile as such a lad should be, and sturdy in consequence of his out-of-door life, Stephen, for that was his name, found it an easy matter to breast the surging tide of spectators following the procession, to slip in where he could to best advantage watch the solemn ceremonies, to stand without fatigue while he drank in all the emotional thrill of the day.

The shrouded crosses, the appeals for rescue of an entombed Christ in the hands of an infidel enemy, the tears and cries of the crowds, worked on the impressionable shepherd lad, unaccustomed to aught but life with his flocks, worked on him so powerfully that he was hot with a desire to rush to Jerusalem and expel the hated Mohammedans from that land and city, once blessed by the living presence of Jesus, and hallowed by the possession of his tomb.

So filled with enthusiasm was Stephen that his burning cheeks and glowing eyes told the tale to an observant priest, who to accomplish his own end, kept close watch of the boy, spoke to him, making inquiries as to his name and occupation, and then decided to make him a tool of destiny.

But of this Stephen knew nothing. Filled with thoughts of what he had seen and heard, at evening he walked slowly towards his home in the little village of Cloyes, walking less on solid earth than on a cloud of dreams and desires, and from that moment he was never again the contented shepherd lad, son of the peasant of Cloyes. He was alive with new emotions now, and as he wandered on the hillside with his flock he was in imagination the hero of daring deeds, taking part in such pictured scenes as his excited fancy could conjure up, until at last, he was in a state of mind suited to any enterprise, prepared to believe any story, however improbable, to

accept any life except that of his own monotonous peasant existence.

While in this mood there came to him on his hillside, several days later, a stranger in the dress of a pilgrim, returned, as he at first said, from Palestine. He was on his way to a distant home and in need of food.

Only too eagerly did Stephen share with him such food as he had, asking in return to be told of the wonders of the Holy Land and of the daring deeds of the heroes who had fallen there in battle. The stranger readily complied with this request and poured into the boy's credulous ears tales well calculated to thrill and excite his already inflamed fancy. Then, watching Stephen closely as he spoke, the stranger said with solemn earnestness:

"But this is not all I have to tell, my lad. There is work for you to do,—for you, the Lord's anointed, his chosen apostle, and in the name of Christ and his Holy Cross, I bid you arise and do his will."

"Work?—for me? From whom comes this message?"

Stephen's eyes were lit with the fire of excited desire and his voice trembled with emotion.

Very slowly the answering words fell from his companion's lips:

"The message is brought by him who sends it. Behold, lad, the Christ of history and of truth! *I bid you arise—rouse up the youth of our land! Lead them to that Holy Sepulchre! As prophet and as leader, go thou where they shall follow, and bring to pass that which nobles and soldiers have failed to accomplish. Go lad—go!*"

Stephen's breath came in quick gasps—his eyes were like coals of fire as he sank on his knees, crying:

"Oh bless me—bless me—I will go—Lord, I will go!"

A hand was laid gently on his head as the deep voice said, "In the name of Jesus, lad—in the name of the Crucified, lead thou thy troops to victory. Across the land, across the sea, lead them to victory!" Then in a less impassioned tone, the stranger added, "I leave with you a letter to the king of France. Haste thou to him with this proof of thy divine mission and he will aid thee in thy enterprise. In the name of Jesus, lad, arise and go!"

A letter was pressed into Stephen's hand. He heard retreating footsteps, and before he had gained his composure and risen to his feet, his divine guest was gone. He was alone with his straying flock, not sure except for the letter, whether he had had a vision or a visitor.

And how was he to know, innocent peasant lad, of an ignorant and superstitious ancestry, brought up on miraculous tales of saints and seers, that the Christ of his visit was no other than that priest whose attention Stephen had attracted by his emotion at Chartres, who with crafty keenness had chosen the peasant boy to carry out his purpose of arousing the youth of the land to undertake a new Crusade? How was Stephen, all aflame as he was, to be supposed to penetrate the priest's disguise, to realise his purpose, and throw off the thrill? He could not and he did not.

Leaving his flocks to ramble at will over the plains and neighbouring hills, with the divine letter clasped in his hand, Stephen ran homeward through the little village where he lived, past its dilapidated church, its quaint shops and rows of houses, over the old stone bridge by which the main street crosses the little river Loir, running in a southerly direction to join the beautiful Loire. The bridge is a pleasant place to linger on a summer day, and recalls many a historic memory of Joan of Arc, who once passed that way, on her way to Orleans—of Philip Augustus—of Richard Cœur-de-Lion—but on naught save his divine mission was the lad Stephen intent as he crossed the bridge on that April day.

Having reached home, he hastily called his parents from their labour, and gathering together such neighbours as could be summoned, he told of his talk with the Saviour, who had come to call him, Stephen, the shepherd boy, from tending his flocks, to rescue the Holy City and tomb from wicked hands, and in proof of the truth of his story he showed the letter from Jesus Christ to the King of France asking the king's aid for Stephen in his holy mission.

As I have said, this was an age of dense ignorance and superstition among the peasant classes. Those who had heard Stephen's tale were dumb with awe and wonder and doubted not its truth. Only his father spoke against the plan, mentioning his son's youth—commanding him to go back to his flocks. But to these commands

Stephen turned a deaf ear, for was not he the Lord's anointed? Who could dictate to him, now that the Divine voice had spoken in accents clear and strong?

On the next day and the next, even until darkness fell over the little town, Stephen narrated his story in the market-place to ever-increasing audiences, telling that now when the defenders of the Holy Sepulchre were so few, and older and stronger Crusaders had failed to carry out their divine purpose by reason of the ravages of war and disease, God had revealed his plan to give the possession of Palestine to those children who should enlist in his holy cause.

"For the last time have we heard of defeat," cried Stephen. "Hereafter shall children show mailed warriors and proud barons how invulnerable are youths when God leads them!"

This cry stirred the youths of Cloyes profoundly, and they all rushed to enlist under the banner of Stephen and the Holy Cross, but the number was not large enough to satisfy Stephen's ambition. He was determined now to rouse all France and in consequence of that desire, he decided to leave his home and go to a town five miles north of Paris—St. Denys, the great shrine of the land, where lie the bones of the martyr Dionysius, the object of countless pilgrimages, where to ever-changing crowds, he could preach his Crusade, and gain recruits for his army.

And so to St. Denys, Stephen of Cloyes went, in May of 1212. Dressed in his shepherd's clothes, for he had no others, with his crook in his hand and a little wallet by his side, he left quiet Cloyes for ever. With a heart throbbing with hope and excitement, he journeyed on, feeling neither fatigue nor fear, and as he went he preached his mission in towns and cities by the way, and ever the interest deepened in this lad who spoke with such burning eloquence, proclaiming himself God's chosen instrument to rescue the Holy Sepulchre, and everywhere he gained recruits. But even in Paris and Chartres, he did not linger long, being eager to reach St. Denys. At last he arrived there, and standing at the door of the historic church which contained the martyr's tomb, proclaimed his new Crusade to astonished crowds whom he fascinated by his unusual eloquence as he told the old story of the sufferings of the Christians in the Holy Land, telling it so simply and so vividly that his

audiences were profoundly stirred, especially by Stephen's last and best appeal. He pointed to the Sepulchre of St. Denys, to which worshippers were thronging, and contrasted its condition with that of the Sepulchre of the Saviour, asking if his hearers would not help him make the Saviour's tomb as honoured and as free from disturbing influences as was that of the saint. He then read his letter to the king and asked if God's commands were to be disregarded, telling of his interview with Christ, and adding that after his day in Chartres, he had gone in search of his flocks and found them missing, but had later discovered them in a field of grain, from which he was about to drive them angrily, when they fell on their knees and begged his forgiveness. This, he said, with other signs, had led him to believe that he was truly God's anointed, even before he had been visited by Christ.

It may well be asked here how a lad scarcely over twelve years of age and born of the peasant class, could have suddenly become so eloquent—so capable of appealing to audiences, and the answer is not easy to give unless one thoroughly understands the spirit of that age in which Stephen lived—an age in which there was much high-coloured and stirring language used by the priests, language which appealed so strongly to an impressionable lad like Stephen, that he unconsciously took it for his own and made use of it; being often carried on the tide of his emotion, far beyond his own understanding of the words and thoughts he was uttering.

Immediately, he became the Saint of the day, and the martyr's bones were deserted by those who preferred to listen to the lad's stirring appeals. It is even reported that he worked miracles to support his own divine claim, and the enthusiasm to join his army grew daily more intense. As pilgrims went back to their homes they carried news of Stephen's Crusade to their children, who, filled with excitement, in turn passed the news on to their friends. And so the interest spread like a contagion throughout all parts of France, through Brittany, where the English ruled, through Normandy, recently added to Philip's domain, to Aquitaine and Provence, to Toulouse and peaceful Gascony. Whatever feuds their parents were engaged in, the children did not care, and were not interested in the wars for power. So while their elders were prevented from unity of action by the strife and political divisions of the land, the young

were one in feeling and in desire, and joined gleefully in Stephen's stirring cry:

"Long enough have you knights and warriors, so boastful and so honoured, been making your fruitless attempts to rescue the tomb of Christ! God can wait no longer! He is tired of your vain puny efforts. Stand back and let us, whom you despise, carry out his commission! He who calls can insure the victory, and we will show you what the children can do!"

Among the children who listened to Stephen's appeals, the more enterprising returned home determined to play a part in the Crusade only second to that of the Prophet, as Stephen was now called. Everywhere in France, they went through their home districts, begging their companions to join the Crusade, and it is probable that these children had much help from priests who sought in every way to inflame the youthful host, and to lead them on to concerted action.

As the army grew larger, the children formed into bands, and marched through towns and villages with all the pomp and display possible, despite much opposition from their parents, who saw with alarm that the excitement was growing daily more intense. The bands of recruits carried lighted candles, waving perfumed censers, and at the head of every band there marched a proud youth carrying the Oriflamme—a copy of the flag of the church, which was kept at St. Denys. The design of this banner was a red triple-tongued flame, symbolic of the tongues of fire that came down at Pentecost. This banner, like the colours of a regiment, was a symbol of honour, and an object of the young Crusader's devotion.

As the bands marched, they either sang hymns, such as had kept up the courage of previous Crusaders, or others composed on the spur of the moment by their revered children's minds, and in all of the hymns came the refrain—"Lord, restore Christendom! Lord, restore to us the true and holy Cross!"

And too they adopted the watchword which for two centuries had rung through Asia. Crying, "God wills it!" children of all classes and conditions and ages, cast aside authority, and joined the army, and soon the movement became like the surge of a great wave, car-

rying the youth of France out on its dangerous tide—girls as well as boys—weak as well as strong—joining the forces.

Of course, the matter attracted the attention of the king, Philip Augustus, who at first, for political reasons, was inclined to favour the young Crusaders, but then seeing how serious the matter really was, and that if it were not suppressed it would bear away the youth of the land, to almost certain disaster, finally issued an edict or command that the children return to their homes.

Kings are too wise to pay any attention even to messages written by a divine hand, and there is no evidence to show that Philip was in any way influenced by the letter given to Stephen by his celestial visitor, and Philip's edict went forth, that there be an end to the uprising of the children.

But in vain was the edict, which the King did not attempt to enforce, in vain were all the commands and threats and pleas of parents and guardians. Stephen's Crusade had become an epidemic. If a lad were locked up that he might not join its ranks, he straightway sickened; some even died of pining; where commands were the only bar to freedom, the youths utterly disregarded them and ran away. So, after a few weeks of Stephen's inflamed preaching there was rebellion in many a before happy household in France, agony in many a mother's heart, who saw her children leaving her, never, as her mother instinct told her, to return.

In the ranks of recruits were many noble youths, sons of counts and barons, who had from birth been brought up with knights and warriors who had won fame and honour in former Crusades, and who told glowing tales of the beauty and charm of the Holy Land to their children, and these were naturally thrilled at the thought of seeing such scenes and doing such deeds of valour, in gorgeous armour and on prancing steeds, for so did they picture themselves, as their fathers had done before them.

And there were others whose fathers had died in the Wars of the Cross, whose feverish dream was to make use of their father's honoured sword and shield and thus complete the work that Death had cut short. When these youths from the hills on which their homes stood, watched the processions passing with uplifted crosses and banners waving high, when they heard the songs and shouts of