



THEN shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: ³⁶ Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. ³⁷ Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? ³⁸ When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? ³⁹ Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? ⁴⁰ And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matt 25:34-40)

IT ONCE occurred to a certain king that if he always knew the right time to begin anything, if he knew who were the right people to listen to and whom to avoid - and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do - he would never fail in any undertaking.

So, he had it proclaimed throughout his kingdom that he would give a great reward to anyone who would teach him what was the right time for every action, who were the most necessary people, and what was the most important thing to do. Many learned men came to the king, but they all answered his questions differently.

All the answers being different, the king agreed with none of the scholars and gave the reward to none. But still wishing to find the right answer to his questions, he decided to consult a hermit widely known for his wisdom.

The hermit lived in a wood which he never left, and he received none but humble folk. So the king put on simple clothes; then before reaching the hermit's cell he dismounted from his horse, and leaving his bodyguard behind, went on alone.

When the king approached, the hermit was digging the ground in front of his hut. Seeing the king, he greeted him and went on digging. The hermit was frail and weak, and each time he stuck his spade into the ground and turned a little earth, he breathed heavily.

The king went up to him and said, "I have come to you, wise hermit, to ask you to answer three questions: How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people who can help me most? What affairs are the most important and need my first attention?"

The hermit listened to the king, but answered nothing. He just spat on his hand and recommenced digging.

"You are tired," said the king; "let me take the spade and work a while for you."

"Thanks!" said the hermit, and giving the spade to the king, he sat down on the ground. When he had dug two beds, the king stopped and repeated his questions. The hermit again gave no answer, but rose, stretched out his hand for the spade, and said, "Now rest a while-and let me work a bit."

But the king did not give him the spade, and continued to dig. One hour passed and another. The sun began to sink behind the trees, and the king at last stuck the spade into the ground and said,

"I came to you, wise man, for an answer to my questions. If you can give me none, tell me so, and I will return home."

"Here comes someone running," said the hermit. "Let us see who it is."

The king turned round and saw a bearded man come hurrying out of the wood. The man held his hands pressed against his breast, and blood was flowing from under them. When he reached the king, he fell fainting on the ground, moaning feebly! The king and the hermit unfastened the man's clothing. There was a large wound in his body.

The king washed it as best he could, and bandaged it with his handkerchief and with a towel the hermit found. But the blood would not stop flowing, and the king again and again washed and re-banded the wound again.

When at last the blood had ceased flowing, the man revived and asked for something to drink. The king brought fresh water and gave it to him. Meanwhile the sun had set, and it was growing cool. So the king, with the hermit's help, carried the wounded man into the hut and laid him on a bed. The man closed his eyes and was quiet; and the king was so tired with his walk and with the work he had done that he crouched down on the threshold, and also fell asleep-so soundly that he slept all through the short summer night:- On awaking in the morning, it was long before he could remember where he was, or who was the strange bearded man lying on the bed and gazing intently at him with shining eyes.

"Forgive me!" said the bearded man in a weak voice, when he saw that the king was awake and was looking at him.

"I do not know you, and have nothing to forgive you," said the king.

"You do not know me, but I know you. I am that enemy of yours who swore to revenge himself on you, because you executed his brother and seized his property. I knew you had gone alone to see the hermit and I intended to kill you on your way back. But the day passed and you did not return. So I came out from my ambush to find you, and ran across your bodyguard, who recognized me and wounded me. I escaped from them, but I should have bled to death had you not dressed my wound. I wished to kill you, and you have saved my life. Now, if I live, and if you wish it, I will serve you as your most faithful slave, and will bid my sons do the same. Forgive me!"

The king was very glad to have made peace with his enemy so easily, and to have gained him for a friend; and he not only forgave him, but said that he would send his servants and his own physician to attend him. In the end he promised to restore the man's property I taken.

Having taken leave of the wounded man, the king went out into the porch and looked around for the hermit. Before departing, he wished once more to beg an answer to the questions he had put.

The hermit was outside, on his knees, sowing seeds in the beds that had been dug the day before. The king approached him and said,

"For the last time, I pray you to answer my questions, wise man."

"You have already been answered," said the hermit, still crouching on his thin legs, and looking up at the king, who stood before him.

"How answered? What do you mean?" asks the king.

"Do you not see?" replied the hermit. "If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday and had not dug these beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you, and you would have repented leaving me. So the most important time was when you dug the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business. Afterwards, when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you attended him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without making his peace with you. So he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important business.

"Remember then: there is only one time that is important that is NOW! It is the truly important time, because it is the only time when we have any power.

The most necessary man is he with whom we are, for no one knows whether he will ever have dealings with any other man. And the most important affair is to do him good, because for that purpose alone was man sent by God into this life!"

~from *'The Child's World, Fifth Reader'* (1917)