

Ios, the Shepherd Boy: Some Parables Concerning the Law

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(These stories of Ios were told by 'Abdu'l-Bahá'
to Lua Getzinger and are here transcribed from memory by May Maxwell.)

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I

IOS was a shepherd boy who tended his flocks in the valleys and on the sloping hills of Persia. He was poor and simple and knew no life but the care of his sheep, but one love he had and one great longing— it was to behold the face of his King. He had never seen this One of whose greatness and goodness he heard wonderful tales, and he felt that he would live content and die happy if he could but once behold his face.

One day Ios heard that the King with his retinue would pass on the high road not far from his pasture. Shaken with the intensity of his love he left everything and stationed himself on the road. At last the Royal Procession appeared, haut boys on horseback, soldiers and buglers glittering and gorgeous in the sunshine.

Ios' eyes gazed past all this to the royal equipage slowly approaching, with flushed face and throbbing heart he watched for the face he had waited and longed for all his life.

Seeing that the procession was stopped in its progress the King enquired [sic] the cause and was informed that a poor shepherd boy stood in the way and begged to see him. The King commanded that the boy be brought, and Ios, trembling with joy came to the side of the carriage, and gazed long and steadfastly on the face he adored. The King amazed at this ardent look said, "Who art thou!" "Ios, the shepherd boy, my King," he replied. "What dost thou seek from me?" "Oh my King," he said, "All my life I have longed for thee. The utmost desire of my heart has been to behold thy face. Now I am happy and content, I can return to my humble life forever blest since I have beheld thee."

The King was greatly touched and looking long and earnestly at the boy passed on his way.

But the memory of Ios haunted him - such love he had not known. All those who surrounded him lived by his favors and bounty, but here was one who sought nothing, asked nothing - who could live and die on the memory of his face.

II

The King's yearning for Ios grew so strong that at last he sent for the shepherd boy and had him brought to the palace. Ios came with eager joy and presented himself trembling and radiant, before the royal presence. Then the King was greatly pleased with Ios and made him the guardian of his treasure and reposed in him a high trust.

But those who had lived by the King's favor were filled with jealousy and tried to find some fault in Ios so that they might destroy him in the eyes of the King. They watched day and night and soon they found a flaw. In the silence of the night when all were sleeping they saw Ios creep stealthily forth, wind his way through the palace and enter a small room far up under the roof. "Ah," they said, "He is robbing the treasury and storing away the treasure in a secret place." Then they hastened with the news to the King. That night he watched with them and saw Ios steal away to his secret hiding place. The King followed, threw open the door and entered the room. It was bare and empty, but on the wall hung the shepherd's coat Ios had worn and his crook with which he tended his flock. "What is the meaning of this, Ios," he exclaimed, "That thou dost creep to this room silently in the dead of night, and thus arouse suspicion when I have so trusted thee?" "Oh, my King," replied Ios, "When first I beheld thee I was a poor ignorant shepherd boy, but thou hast raised me to this lofty state through thy pure bounty and generosity, therefore, I never wish to forget from what I came, but to remain ever humble and grateful to thee. Thus I come each night to reflect on what I was and what Thou has made me through Thy bounty, generosity and favor."

III

One day while the King was riding with his courtiers and favorites he opened a wallet in his saddle [sic], and cast handfuls of precious jewels in the road. His friends stopped, dismounted and gathered the gifts scattered by his loving hand. Ios alone remained at his side with his eyes fastened on the beloved face, never glancing away. Then the courtiers murmured saying, "See Ios, he despises the gifts of the King and will not trouble himself to attain them." The King looked at him and smiling said, "How is this, Ios, dost thou despise my gifts?"

"Never have I desired anything from thee, but to behold thy face, this has been and ever shall be sufficient for this servant."

IV

In Persia they have a great variety of delicious melons and it is the custom in this season to hold feasts and serve this abundant fruit to the guests. When the season came and the melons were ripe the King held a feast and invited many people. Ios was absent engaged on some service, but presently the guests saw that there was one melon left uncut. Then they murmured among themselves saying, "You will see that this melon, which is no doubt very sweet and delicious is reserved for the Beloved of the King," and soon the King sent for

Ios, and cutting the melon gave him a piece saying "Thou, too, must partake of my feast. I have kept this melon for Thee." The King also took a piece, but when he tasted it he exclaimed "This melon is as bitter as gall, how couldst thou eat it, Ios?" But the boy replied, "All my life I have received sweet from thy hand, now, if thou dost give me bitter shall I refuse it? For bitter is sweet from the hands of my King."

V

That which the King valued in all his domains was the Royal Gardens, which were vast and very beautiful with trees and flowers, lakes and fountains, and where every living thing was safe and protected, for it was forbidden therein to kill. And Ios so lived in the King's heart, was so loved and trusted that he made him the guardian and custodian of this Garden of Life and Beauty, which was the highest honor in his Kingdom. Then Ios faithfully guarded his trust.

One day as Ios was walking in the beautiful Gardens, the King's son, who had been jealous of him, crept stealthily up behind him and swiftly shot an arrow from his bow and fled. It pierced the breast of a swan and the red blood flowed down the pure white breast into the water, and the swan swayed and drooped and died.

Ios stood aghast with grief and horror, gazing at the swan then at the bow lying in the path at his feet. As he stooped to pick it up a gardener approached and accused Ios of killing the swan. Then the man hastened to the Royal Presence and told what Ios had done. The King summoned him and said "What hast thou done?" Ios bowed his head in silence. "Speak," the King commanded, "Who has slain the swan?" But Ios would not speak. The King's heart was breaking and he exclaimed, "Thy silence condemns thee. If thou dost not speak and justify thyself I shall banish thee forever from my face." Ios lifted his eyes and looked long on the King's face, then meekly bowed his head and went out from his presence and went alone into exile.

Time passed, and the Prince's conscience gave him no rest. He saw how his Father grieved for Ios, and at last he heard that Ios was dying of a broken heart in his lonely hut far away. Smitten with remorse he threw himself at his Father's feet and confessed to having killed the swan. The King in great grief sprang up and cried out, "Take me to Ios." And when he came in haste to the hut he found him dying. He rushed to him, clasped him in his arms, kissed his brow, his lips, while his tears rained on his face. "Oh, Ios, my servant, my Beloved, thou must not leave me; I love thee, thou hast sacrificed thy life for my son." And Ios, lying in his arms, gazing upon his face exclaimed: "I die in Paradise upon Thy Breast, my King!"

— Ios, the Shepherd Boy: Some Parables Concerning the Laws of the Spiritual Life (Used by permission of the curator)