

Psalms of David

Illustrated by James S. Freemantle

Foreword

My father lived in India all his life. His father served with the army there, and had originally come from Yorkshire. His mother was of Irish stock, and lived to a great age, about 108 I believe. James Swan Freemantle was born at Trichinopoly in southern India in 1859. He had an ordinary sort of education and never had any special art instruction, but he probably trained as an engineering draftsman.

His family moved up to Bihar in northern India when I was quite young, and he used to paint the scenes he could see from the windows of the family home. He too joined the army and traveled throughout the Middle East, storing memories of the landscape which he used later in his life in *The Psalms of David* do not know much about his first marriage except that he had two children. In 1906 James Freemantle married Clara, fifteen years his junior and, like him, the parent of two children from a previous marriage. My parents' marriage was extremely happy, and Father loved Clara devotedly until the end of his life. *The Psalms of David* was begun at about the time they married and worked on periodically during their thirty years together. James was not a religious man, but he poured all the skills he possessed into his rendering of the psalms. Because they are such beautiful love poetry he saw his illumination of them as a testament to his love for Mother.

After he left the army, Father worked in the jails department for some time. I think that this was in southern India, where I was born at Vellore in 1912. Then we moved to Samastipur, where we lived for two or three years. I remember my father seated at a desk by the window with his paints, specially ordered from Winsor and Newton, spread out before him. He only used those paints and India ink, often taking many hours to do just a couple of lines of his fine detailed lettering. Then he would go back and add a wealth of decoration. Sometime he would do the lettering with a paintbrush, making the bodies of the letters first and then adding the tails, painstakingly so that no join would show. Thus, half a page a night represented good progress. In about 1916 we moved to Gorakhpur near the Nepalese border, and soon Father took a job on the railways, for with five children to send to school, he needed the concessionary fares.

The Psalms of David is full of vivid illustrations from those years-scenes and wildlife which can be readily identified. The brilliantly colored blooms of India are here-the purple sweet pea, the book flower which closes at night, great big jacaranda trees and magnificent poinsettias, highly scented mimosa and many others. There are yellow Indian poppies in Psalm 25, coconut palms in Psalm 44 and lovely wild violets in Psalm 100. The flame of the forest was a wonderful sight and the laburnums had clusters of flowers three to four feet long. There were canna lilies everywhere, flowering all year round, and wonderful violets. There is an Indian lark on page 42, a bigger bird than the British one; the hoppie butterfly, shown on page 143, is very weak and never goes out in the sun.

Father used to collect drummer butterflies like the one shown on page 315. His keen observation of these and other animals is shown in the many pages decorated with storks, kingfishers and pheasants, and many other examples of flora and fauna.

There are many illustrations of familiar sights round Gorakhpur. There was a large lake where my parents used to go walking and there were often spectacular sunsets and moonrises. This take appears on pages 12 and 13. Page 103 shows a Brahmin temple with a post and flags. The flags flown at mealtimes warned passersby not to step inside the shadow of the pole or the Brahmin's food would be contaminated and spoiled. Page 20 shows Chinese lanterns such as were used at home and page 21 shows a nearby church.

The Golden Temple at Amritsar appears on page 113. Page 159 shows a scene from the journey up to school. The school was at Mussooree, up at 7,500 feet above sea level and thought to be healthier for us children than the heat of the plains. There are also remembered scenes from his travels in the army harbors and villages in Turkey, and ships at sea, as well as marvelously detailed reproductions of Middle Eastern buildings and scenes copied from Victorian travel books, revealing his draftsman's training in the eye for detail. Page 166 marks the end of my father's first period of work on the psalms, and he must have finished on January 4, 1918, the day inscribed on the highly decorated ornamental dedication: "To my beloved wife, Clara, from her loving husband, James S. Freemantle." He started work on the book again in the late 1920s, when he was living about fifty miles from Lucknow in a tiny place called Jarwal Road, which was very lonely. There was no activity except for two or three trains a day passing through and nothing to see except the great variety of flowers which grew all year round. So he continued with the psalms.

The first few pages were very hurried with little decoration or embellishment, but by about page 185 you can see that he was again taking joy in the book and his style starts to broaden. Although not as richly as the first half of the book, there are still some very fine illustrations, such as the jacaranda on 266, the scene on page 277, and the page ornamentation on page 307. His fine distinctive script does not falter or give any signs of old age.

My father finished The Psalms of David when living my sister in Lucknow. He died of pneumonia a year of finishing this book, in 1934.

-- *Stephen Freemantle*

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