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A Story of Zarahemla

Author(s): B.H. Roberts

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Abstract: Fictional story, set in the time of Nephi, son of Helaman, in which the characters watch for signs of Christ's birth and receive great joy.

they who hear the message and refuse to accept it, will be under condemnation for rejecting the truth of heaven, and

cannot partake of the blessings of the heavenly kingdom.

B. H. Roberts.

A STORY OF ZARHEMLA.

"WHY does Nephi not come? 'Tis past the time, and it is not usual for him to fail."

The speaker was a man of some sixty years, erect and strong, though his hair was gray and care and toil had left their lines in the noble lineaments of his face—a face that you may look upon once and carry it in your memory forever. The forehead was broad at the base and sloped gently backward; the cheek-bones were high, and though the chin and lips were half hidden in the white beard, the former was sufficiently massive and the latter sufficiently compressed to denote firmness of character. The nose was Roman in type and moderately large. The eyes a dark grey, large, quick and piercing: and if, indeed, the eyes are the windows of the soul, the soul that looked from these windows was courageous, frank, intelligent, spiritual and benevolent. He was below the medium height, but the frame was heavy and compact, the limbs massive and well set, and in both form and movement there was a conscious dignity of character. It may be true among the pampered sons of luxury that "time steals fire from the mind or vigor from the limbs," but in this case the sixty-five years of the man's life had done little towards sapping either his bodily strength or mental vigor, for he seemed, aside from the whiteness of his hair and beard, to be rather in the prime of manhood than in its sear and yellow leaf.

Such was Nephi, the son of Helaman, the great grandson of the second Alma, and one of the most remarkable prophets and characters of the Western Continent. Like the second Alma he had given up his position of chief judge of the land, that he might devote himself more completely to the work of the ministry. Such, however, was the wickedness of the peo-

ple that he had great anxiety of spirit in his ministry and small returns for his untiring and constant efforts. Violence and crime of every nature ran riot in the land, and those who administered the laws, for the most part, were either too weak to vindicate them, or were hand and glove with the transgressors.

With a zeal characteristic of the man the prophet labored to bring them to repentance. He foretold the calamities that would overtake them, the destruction of their cities, the desolation of their lands, but all to no purpose, reform they would not; not even the power of God so frequently displayed in his ministry could soften their obdurate hearts or preserve the prophet himself from their hatred. At the very time we begin this narrative, so constantly had the people of Zarhemla sought his life, that for some time he had kept in seclusion.

"Why does he not come?" again broke from the lips of the prophet. "Can it have happened that those who seek my life have fallen upon my son? Oh thou Almighty God! ever my friend and preserver, preserve thou too the life of my son; grant that he might come to me in safety, that he may take from me the great weight of responsibility and let thy servant, unburdened, come to thee in thy kingdom, even as the Spirit whispereth." Calmed by that peaceful influence which ever rests upon the righteous after prayer, the prophet seated himself on a point of rocks near the summit of the hill, and was soon lost in meditation.

It was an expansive landscape which lay spread out before him, the vision limited on the south and west only by a haziness which hung over field and forest, river and plain, and to the northwest by groups of mountains which stood as watch and guard over the wilderness of Hermounts. The grand valley of the

river Sidon, for such was the stream whose waters were seen in the distance shimmering in the glorious sunlight, was full of historic interest. Directly west of the hill, from which the prophet was overlooking the valley, was the city of Zarhemla, for so many centuries the chief city of the Nephites, and which might not be improperly styled the Jerusalem of the Western Continent. The very hill on which the prophet sat, known to the Nephites as Amnihu, was the rallying place of the forces of the arch traitor Amlici who, eighty-six years before, sought to overthrow the republic and re-establish a monarchy.

The prophet had not been seated long when his reverie was broken by the subdued blast of a horn from the base of the hill. Wrapping his light robe closely about him he descended to the little dell, whence the sound of the horn proceeded, and there met and warmly embraced a noble youth whose resemblance in feature to the prophet proclaimed him his son. The younger Nephi, however, was much taller than his father, not so massive of limb, and yet his frame gave evidence of unusual strength as well as great activity. Just now he appeared exhausted; his tunic of light material was torn in several places and stained with perspiration; his belt and sword (his only weapon) he held in his hand, while suspended from his shoulder was the horn which had acquainted his father of his presence. The deer thongs which made fast his sandals were unloosed, and his limbs and feet were lacerated and bleeding.

"How is it Nephi that you are so late, and why so fatigued?" said the prophet as with loving solicitude he wrapped his own robe about his son and led him to a fallen tree, where they seated themselves.

"Our enemies, father, have become more watchful of late, and before I started Miriam, who had been watching from the tower in the garden, observed several suspicious creatures about our home. At last I despaired of leaving Zarhemla unobserved and so walked boldly out at the north gate, and for a distance followed down the west bank of Sidon. I

was preparing to cross the river when I discovered that I was followed by a party of five men among whom was Giddianhi's lieutenant, Zemnariah. Knowing their object to be merely to follow me in hopes of finding your place of concealment, I resolved they should run for it. Casting my robe away I started at a rapid pace in the direction of the mountains of Hermounts. About mid-day, hearing and seeing nothing of my pursuers I turned to the north-west until I reached the Sidon, and then crossed to the east bank where I sank down exhausted from the intense heat. Arousing myself I prayed for strength, and pushed my way through the wilderness of swamps that lies north of this place until I reached this our appointed place of meeting."

"You have indeed had a weary day's march, my son, and braved many dangers, as the Gadianton robbers infest the country in the vicinity of Hermounts. I thank God you have reached me in safety. But come, after so much exertion you need food and rest."

He led the way from the north to the east side of the hill, and through a dense growth of vines and under-brush to the face of a bold cliff; they entered and groped along a dark narrow passage for some distance, when the elder Nephi stopped, procured a flint and steel with which he succeeded in lighting a torch. The narrow passage here abruptly turned to the right, and a few paces brought them to where the passage widened into a large chamber. Placing the torch in a socket made for it in the wall, the prophet motioned his son to a couch of skins dimly seen on the opposite side of the chamber. He soon procured a vessel of water from a stream that passed through the farther end of the cave and with his own hands bathed the feet and limbs of his son. This done he procured some corn bread, dried venison and fruits, of which the young man partook heartily.

"My son," began the prophet after Nephi had finished his meal and threw himself back in a half reclining posture on the couch, "you know that for some time I have been impressed that my

departure from this sphere of labor is near at hand, whether it is that I shall soon go the way of all the earth"—“Father,” broke in the young man with tremulous voice. But before he could add more the prophet silenced him by a gesture—“No, my son, there is no need of grief in contemplating that mysterious change which soon or late will overtake us all, unless they who depart have not the hope of a glorious resurrection.” Thus resuming his remarks at the point where his son’s exclamation broke in upon him, he said: “But whether I shall lay my body down in the grave, or be translated as was the prophet Elijah, I know not; but this I know that the Spirit constraineth me to place in your keeping all those sacred records kept by the prophets from the time our fathers left Jerusalem until my day, and make ready for my departure. For this purpose I sent for thee to meet me here.”

At this announcement Nephi had started up, his heart beating wildly, for he knew that one great cause of his father’s life being sought, by apostate Nephites and hate-blinded Lamanites, was that it was known that he had in his possession these very records; and it was with feelings of alarm that he heard these things were about to be given into his keeping.

“Come with me, my son, and I will show you a treasure more rich than the wealth of kingdoms.” So saying he took the torch from its socket and led the way along a passage opposite the one by which they entered the first chamber. Pausing at last in an apartment about twelve feet square, and five high, he placed the torch in the young man’s hands, and going to one corner of the chamber and removing a huge slab of stone, neatly fitted into the side of the wall, he drew from the excavation made in the solid rock, a large breast-plate of burnished steel in which were set in a rim, two clear, half transparent stones—this was the Urim and Thummim or the “Interpreters,” as the prophet called them, as he laid the breast plate on a low, square table. There followed a large set of plates evidently brass and filled with Hebrew characters—the rec-

ord of the Jews brought by Lehi’s company from Jerusalem. After this another large set of plates was produced having the appearance of gold; many plates in this set were blank without characters or writing of any description. “These are the larger plates of Nephi, my son, and contain a minute account of the travels, colonizations, wars and government of our people, and on these you will engrave the events of your own day, after the manner in which I have instructed you in that art.”

Here a smaller bundle of plates was brought out, having the appearance of gold. The engraving upon them was exceedingly fine and bore evidence of having been wrought with great care and skill. “These, my son, are the small plates of Nephi,” said the prophet, and are of great value, for they contain many prophecies concerning the coming and mission of Messiah.” “This,” he continued as he produced a still smaller bundle of thin gold plates, “is the book of the prophet Ether found by the people of Limhi.” Here was produced a round brass ball of curious workmanship with two spindles in it. “This,” explained the prophet, “is Liahona, or the Director, prepared by the Lord for Lehi and his colony, and which through the faith of the first Nephi directed them in their travels to the promised land.”

Last of all he drew from its hiding place a splendid sword. The hilt was of pure gold, curiously worked, and the blade of the finest steel. “This is the sword of Laban, and from the time it came into the hands of the first Nephi until now, it has never been unsheathed but in the cause of righteousness and liberty; and those who are made the guardians of it receive this strict commandment, that as they hope to prosper in heaven’s favor, they are to see to it that it is wielded in no other.” With silence the young man listened to these explanations and charges and gazed with admiration and wonder upon this collection of sacred records; his breast glowed with a holy enthusiasm, his half formed fears were changed to a righteous zeal for the safety of these sacred things—

the spirit of the prophets, slumbering within him from his childhood, was awakened.

The conference of father and son over the sacred records and the manner of preserving them continued until the dawn of the next day. Then, having carefully concealed the records, and refreshed themselves with food, they set out toward the north-east, the young man insisting upon accompanying his father, at least for a part of the day. About noon they separated, the father to continue his course to an unknown destination and unknown fate, the son to return to Zarahemla as the future prophet-historian of the Nephites.

While this remarkable interview between Nephi and his son was progressing at the hill Amnihu, events of a very thrilling and interesting character occurred in Zarahemla.

Soon after the departure from the city of the younger Nephi, a man of commanding presence, but with a half sinister expression, in his dark, handsome face, entered the enclosure surrounding the home of the elder Nephi. At the entrance to the house, a square structure of hewn stone, the portico of which was approached by a short flight of broad stone steps, he was met by a girl, not more than eighteen. Her full but graceful figure was clad in white garments gathered in graceful folds about her. Her complexion was beautifully fair, though her hair, of which there was a rich growth, was as black as the raven's wing, and held back from her low brow by a plain clasp-band of pure gold. The features were regular, and the face lit up with large, dark eyes of wondrous lustre, revealing the depth and purity of her soul. This was Miriam, the foster sister of the younger Nephi. She was of Lamanitish parentage, but the curse of a dark skin had been removed through her faith in Christ, and in answer to the prayers of her guardian. Her parents had been converted in the land Desolation under the teachings of the elder Nephi, and when he fled from that land they accompanied him, but before reaching Zarahemla the parents died; the

child he brought with him and reared in his family as his own.

"Our Lamanite maiden is about early this morning," said Giddianhi, for he it was.

"I might say the same of our Gadianton friend," replied Miriam, her cheek flushing at the too familiar hint at her parentage. The man started under this sudden retort; for though it was notorious he had deserted the faith of his fathers, he was not aware that his connection with the secret society, first founded among the Nephites by Gadianton, was suspected.

"And if I am a member of that society, I should only be one of a band of men who seek to wrest usurped authority from the hands of canting priests and their dupes," he said with some warmth. "It ill becomes you, Miriam," he continued, "to speak with disdain of the brave men who risk their lives to right the wrongs of your people, the descendants of Laman, to whom rightly belongs the government of the land."

"I have always observed," replied the maiden, "that they who do wrong put forward some excuse to justify their actions; and as it is with individuals I suppose it is with societies. They must needs conjure up some object, wearing virtue's shape, and falsely persuade themselves that their evil, because it hath an outward semblance of virtue, is good. No, no Giddianhi, your sophistry has no weight with me. As for the wrongs of 'my people,' as you are pleased to call the Lamanites, their wrongs exist only in their imagination set on fire by dissenting Nephites, disappointed in their own unrighteous lust for power." Giddianhi winced under this home thrust.

"My people," continued the maiden, "are the people of God, I know and will own no other, and among us there is no such distinction as Nephite or Lamanite, all are one and the children of our Lord."

"Your speech, Miriam, proclaims your training," said Giddianhi with a mocking laugh. "Though a stranger had listened to you, if he had ever heard old Nephi preaching in the temple, he would have known you were his pupil; why that

stripling Nephi, who apes his father's cant, could not have said it better, and not half so charmingly, for beauty and grace, even make fanaticism interesting." The latter part of the sentence was intended to be complimentary, but Miriam's eyes flashed with indignation, and turning to enter the house, she said—"You insult my father and my brother, as well as deride my faith, I care not to listen longer to you."

Before she could reach the door, however, Giddianhi caught her arm and drew her back. "Listen to me, girl," he said, almost fiercely. "I came not to deride your faith nor to speak slightingly of this pretended prophet and his son, who may have done you some kindness; but to urge again my suit for you in marriage."

"That sir, I have told you before and now tell you again, is a vain suit. A man who is untrue to his God and his people, one cannot hope will be true to his wife. Let me go."

"Not until you have listened to what I have to say," he replied. "The government of this land is on the eve of a mighty revolution, the judges will be overthrown, and a kingdom established. It is within your power," lowering his voice to a whisper, "to become the queen. I offer you wealth, position, honor; every want, every desire shall find its fulfilment."

"Stop!" she cried; "I would not consent though you could make me fifty times a queen. I have ever distrusted you, and this disclosure of your treason makes me loathe you. Nor shall it succeed; the chief judge and governor, the good Lachoneus, shall know of your designs. Your discretion should have taught you better than to seek to make me the partner of your treason." She endeavored to wrench herself free from his grasp; but in vain, he held her hard.

"Not so fast my very patriotic lady. Think not I have thrust myself so completely into your power. Young Nephi left the city this morning, on some secret message to his father. Zemnariah, my trusted friend, and a party of Lamanites are following him, and ere the sun shall

set, our party will have in their power this dotard prophet and his son; and I swear by all the sacred vows given us by Gadianon, that if you betray me, their lives shall be the price of your folly."

At this threat, a frightened expression came into the girl's eyes, a tremor shook her frame, and a sickening sensation almost stopped the beating of her heart. Giddianhi observed the changes that had come over her, and at once surmised the cause of her intense agitation.

"So, so," he half muttered, "young Nephi's danger robs our lady patriot of her zeal. For some time I have suspected the affection between you of a different character to that of a brother and sister."

The girl's cheek, which for a moment had been deadly pale, was now flushed with crimson. It was not the blush of shame, but of indignation. Breaking loose from his grasp, she drew herself up to her full height as she said: "Nephi at heart is good and noble, and his soul would disdain to persecute a helpless woman. I pray that an ever merciful Providence will deliver him from your power."

"You shall see that my hate is swifter of foot than the mercy of your Providence," he said, now giving way to jealous anger. "Meantime, remember that your silence on what I have disclosed to you is, for the present, the price of his and his father's safety. Let me further say, that should you reveal what I have said to you, it would but hasten the revolution. The blow would have been struck ere now, but for a few, half fearful of the wild ravings of that mad Lamanite prophet, who prated on our walls, some five years ago, about signs being given of the birth of this long promised Messiah. The time has passed, and the mad man's promised sign has failed; but some, ever timid at opposing what is esteemed supernatural, pleaded for a little time, that more people may join our cause and the revolution be made the more easy—then away with this usurped power that cringes at the feet of saintly priests, and cannot

move but at the dictation of prophets. The people shall learn what freedom is, and they who rule shall feel the independence and pride which power gives. Think of what I have said to you; look with more favor on my suit, for the time will come when I can command that for which I now plead."

With this he turned and walked rapidly away, leaving the gentle maiden distressed with contending anxieties, hopes and fears and half formed doubts. She knew that there had been much disputation among the people respecting the prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite, about the sign of Messiah's birth; many contending that the time for it was past; that many were going over to the unbelievers every day, and that the land was full of bold, wicked men who would halt at nothing to accomplish their own ambitious ends. She was frightened most that the peace of the city and country were threatened with one of those civil wars, which had so frequently brought disaster upon the Nephites, and yet she was powerless to do anything, except precipitate the calamity. For some time her agitation well nigh over-powered her, but at last in her secret chamber she poured out her soul in prayer, and received strength and peace of mind, and went about her household duties, directing the servants in their work. So the day passed, but when darkness settled over the city and Nephi did not return, her fears were again aroused. All night she listened and watched for his coming, but still he did not come. The grey dawn found her at the tower in the garden looking anxiously in the direction of the hill Amnihu, whose forest-crested out-lines rose distinctly above the horizon beginning to be made brilliant by approaching day. "Can it be possible that Nephi has fallen into the hands of his enemies?" was the question she asked herself a thousand times.

The sun had sunk behind the heights of Hermounts, leaving the heavens flooded with glorious light, when, as Miriam was walking in the garden, she was startled by a quick footstep on the gravel walk. Turning hastily around in

the hope of meeting her foster-brother, she was disappointed and not a little alarmed to find that it was Giddianhi. "I am not so welcome as the one whose return you are so anxiously expecting," he said, as he approached her, "but I tell you he will not come, except as the prisoner of those, who followed him to the retreat of his father; and when he so returns, I shall be most happy to inform you."

During these remarks Miriam had walked in the direction of the house, he following closely behind her, and as she reached the steps leading to the portico, he laid his hand upon her arm and detained her. "You can ill-afford to be so haughty towards me, Miriam, and it will be to your interest to listen to me. This day a decree has been issued to the effect that if in ten days the sign of Messiah's birth is not given, in fulfillment of the poor, crazed Lamanite prophet's prediction, those who refuse to give up these foolish and wicked traditions, will be put to death. Free men refuse any longer to submit to the fears a belief in your God inspires. It is in my power now to help you, to save you, if you will come to me. The time is past for that sign to be given; it is a childish superstition, yet so persistent is both the elder and younger Nephi in their fanaticism, that they will perish, and encourage their dupes to perish, rather than forsake the tradition of their fathers."

"I hope," said Miriam, "they will be as consistent in this trial as they have in all others; their God has never deserted them, nor do I believe He will now."

"My friendship to them in this trial will be of more importance to them than that of their God, and that is in your power to purchase. Only be mine, and though this edict fall upon all others, yet they shall live, even though they will not deny their faith. Refuse, and their fate is sealed."

"You boast great power, sir, but still I believe that God's power is above that you possess; I will trust in him and still refuse you; if the worst comes, it will be only to perish with the Saints of God,

and to perish with *him* would be preferable to living with you even in a palace."

He was now livid with rage, and, seizing her by the arm, he hissed rather than said—"Think not that such is the fate that awaits you. You shall not even die with him, though you shall see him die. But you shall live. Aye, and that with me. Not my wife, but my slave, to come and go, to sit or stand, at my nod, and yield to all my will. She struggled to free herself from him, but all in vain. He held her fast and threw his arms about her. She gave a wild scream for help, and the next moment a tall form sprung from under a palm tree and with one blow of his clenched hand stretched her assailant at his feet. With a glad cry of surprise and joy she rushed into the arms of her protector, for it was Nephi, her foster-brother; nay, more than that, for they were betrothed. Giddianhi slowly rose to his feet and with an oath disappeared in the fast deepening twilight.

The allotted ten days had nearly passed, and many, in despair of the sign of Messiah's birth being given, had denied the faith. On the afternoon of the tenth day the few in the city of Zarahemla, who remained steadfast, were gathered into the temple to fast and pray. Miriam was there and her gentle manners and patient resignation was a source of strength to all about her. Fathers were there whose hearts were wrung with anguish for the fate that threatened those dearer to them than life; yet their white faces gleamed with determination, and it was plain to be seen they had fixed their hearts to meet the worst. Mothers clasped their little ones close to their throbbing breasts, and ever and anon raised their tear-stained faces to look into the eyes of their loved and loving husbands. Children stood grouped about looking with childish wonder at their grief-stricken parents, and some wept with them for no other reason than that they saw their parents in affliction, but knew not the calamity that awaited them.

Without the temple, the unbelievers were assembled, rejoicing over the dis-

may of those who had believed the prophets and trusted in God. The wicked oath, the coarse jest, the ribald song rose above the moaning of the faithful within and mocked their sorrow. They had discovered that Nephi was not among those now in the temple, and they supposed he had made his escape. With this they taunted the faithful, inside, saying, "Where is your prophet now?" "Does he shrink from the faith he urges you to accept?" "Does a true shepherd leave his flock?" These taunts were most difficult for Miriam to bear, and they had been most fruitful in turning men and women away from the faith.

Before the approaching day had streaked the east with light, Nephi had passed the lines of the guard set to see that none, who believed in the promised sign, should escape, and in a secret place all the day long he had pleaded with his God to deliver his people. His absence, however, had been taken advantage of by his enemies who accused him of cowardice. Giddianhi, at whose instigation the decree of death upon all who looked for the sign to be given, was most industrious in giving out this cry of cowardice, though he was enraged to think that he whom he wished most to destroy should escape him. In his heart he had no faith in the accusation he so loudly made, and he trembled for his own security so long as the young prophet remained alive and free.

The sun had sunk far down in the western sky when those in the temple were surprised at a sudden cessation of the shouts and yells of the rabble outside, and a stillness, as sudden as it was unexpected, prevailed all about them. A moment later the young prophet Nephi appeared at the entrance of the temple, and walked up to the head of the grand hall. Facing the Saints and the people who now came thronging into the temple after him, he raised his hand for silence, and as he did so his face shone with a strange brightness. "Ye faithful ones, be of good cheer, I come to you with the word of the Lord, that this night shall the sign be given, and to-morrow will our Messiah be born into the world."

His clear voice rang through all parts of the temple and was heard by thousands of those outside. The faithful, who had all day looked upon death as certain, now burst into tears of joy. Fear seized upon the vast multitude and they trembled. Some few tried even now to deride the idea, and mock the fears of those who trembled; but few who had heard the voice of the prophet and felt the power that attended his words could doubt their truth. All with eager expectancy turned their faces to the west, where the sun was fast sinking out of sight; but after it had sunk behind the distant mountains, the brightness of the day continued to fill the heavens; an hour passed; two, three, and yet it was undiminished. Out in the north-west horizon appeared a star of great brilliancy. This, too, had been one of the promised signs. All night the light continued, and the next morning when the sun peeped over the eastern horizon, it added but little to the light which had continued through the hours of the night; but it told the people that the night was passed, and the sign of Messiah's birth foretold by their prophets had now been given.

Not alone then on the plains of Judea did the birth of Messiah bring glad tidings of great joy and peace, but in the valley of Sidon, and throughout the land of America the hearts of men were made glad, and they, too, felt the influence of that song sung by the angels to the poor shepherds of Judea—"Glory to God in

the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

The greater part of the people on the western continent were converted to a belief in Christ, through these signs being given. Giddianhi, however, with a number of his wicked followers, fled to the wilderness of Hermounts, and in a few years gathered about him an army of desperate characters and again sought the overthrow of the government. In this attempt he failed, and in a desperate battle that was fought, he himself was slain. His lieutenant, Zemnariah, rallied his broken forces and gave battle to the Nephites. His forces were routed and he himself taken and hanged.

The elder Nephi was never heard from again after his strange departure, and his fate was never revealed to his people.

The younger Nephi was a faithful prophet and servant of God, as Miriam was a faithful, virtuous wife and noble mother. Both lived through those terrible scenes of destruction and desolation, by which the whole face of the land was changed, at the time of Messiah's crucifixion and during the three days in the tomb. When Messiah, after his resurrection, visited the western continent, both Nephi and Miriam were in the company to whom he first appeared. Nephi was made the chief Apostle in the Church, and Miriam was warmly greeted and commended by the Lord for her faith and devotion. *Horatio.*

A ROMAN CIRCUS.

IN the last chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we read, that Paul dwelt two whole years in Rome, teaching and preaching of all that concerned Christ and the new faith, as it was then called. Just where Paul's house was situated, we have no means of ascertaining, but when he was a prisoner, it might be presumed, he was lodged in the Prætorian camp—the site of which is now occupied as a barracks and military parade ground. From the fact that he speaks

of his friends among "the household of Cæsar," it may also be presumed that he often visited the Palatine hill, where the palace of the reigning emperor then stood.

In going to and from the magnificent homes of his patrons, he would see the arena of the enormous Circus Maximus, occupying the valley beneath him, with its successive rows of seats, running almost up to his feet, and on the other side of the valley, on the slopes of the