

Choice Literature.

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A KING OF TYRE.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

BY JAMES M. LUDLOW, AUTHOR OF "THE CAPTAIN OF THE JANIZARIES," ETC.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The town of Samaria crowned the hill that rises from the centre of a magnificent valley, like an inverted cup in a lordly dish. Far away to the east stand the mountain walls of Gilead and Ammon and Moab; while on the west stretch the uplands of Ephraim and the gleaming waters of the Great Sea. The nearer hills, terraced into gigantic steps, and ordinarily luxuriant with vineyards and fig-gardens, were now covered with rankest vegetation of wild growth, at once nature's rebuke and invitation to the husbandman.

The old palace of Ahab, built with bankrupting magnificence by that renegade king of Israel, had long since fallen to ruin. Hard by stood a sarcophagus in which had once rested the spice-embalmed body of some fair princess, but which was now the feeding-trough for a herd of swine. A superb pillar of porphyry, polished until it had once reflected the gay lights that flashed about it, was now a scratching-post for the cattle that roamed at will through the valley.

Since the Persian king had appointed Sanballat, the Moabite chieftain, to be satrap of Samaria, the land had been somewhat improved. The bats had been frightened out of the niches in the palace. The storks no longer sat enthroned upon the stately columns, nor posed upon one leg, with drooping wings, looking down lugubriously upon the passer-by—the symbolic funeral directors of dead empires since time began. The great cedar roof that once spanned the hall had been succeeded by a double awning of canvas—the outer covering of black goat's hair, the inner of white linen, upon which were wrought tapestries whose gay colours compensated for their rude forms.

By the side of the grand doorway, with its enormous lintels and cracked cross-piece of stone, stood the tall banner-staff of the satrap, in sight of a hundred tents which sheltered the standing army of Samaria. This band of braves was composed chiefly of Moabite men, swarthy, long-limbed, with treacherous looks, as if seeking to repel the historic taunt of their ill-begetting as a race from the incestuous daughter of Lot. Their officers were lithe and gallant Persians, each one of whom boasted the various deeds he would have performed if the last expedition against the Greeks had not been chiefly a naval affair. More plausible, perhaps, were their stories of hair-breadth escapes in their adventures connected with the harems of Babylon and Susa.

Sanballat, the satrap, was not in military mood as he reclined upon a long divan in his pavilion. Seated upon the floor beside, fondling his long beard, was a young girl. A glance could detect their relationship. The stiff black bristles that stood upon the man's head were surely of kin to the raven locks that fell softly about her temples. Both had the same jet eyes. In hers the pupils contrasted finely with the pure white balls; in his they were set in blood-shot orbs. Her forehead was low and broad, but moulded as if by some sculptor; his was of the same outline, but knobbed, as if with fiercer passions, and wrinkled by a hundred cares, no one of which had as yet dropped a shadow upon her brow. The father's straight lips were slightly arched in the daughter. Her lips won by asking; his evidently gained only by commanding. His skin was tanned and roughed by years of exposure to the elements, perhaps discoloured by excessive use of wine; hers was bronzed by the kissing of the Syrian sun, but not enough to hide the healthy blood that tinted itself through, and displayed her beauty in all the delicate shades of blushes. The crimson upon her cheeks and temples was just now of a deeper hue than usual, as Sanballat was saying:—

"My Nicaso must let her father keep charge of her heart. The satrap's daughter shall not be, as other maidens, the prey of any fine fellow whose manner may be pleasing. Such a face and form as yours, to say nothing of your lineage, would gain you admission to the court of Susa or Memphis. Old Orpha, your nurse, tells me that you talk over-much of some young swain. I do not ask who, for none worthy of my fair one lives in Samaria."

"I believe you," replied the girl, playfully plucking a grey hair from his beard. "No one in Samaria is good enough for the great Sanballat's daughter. I will sell for too much; for—a satrapy of all Palestine, if Artaxerxes likes my looks! or for an alliance with the new king of Tyre, if the daughter of the rich Ahimelek dies broken-hearted because Baal will not send back her Hiram."

She leaped to her feet, and, catching up a timbrel, gracefully performed the movement of a dance.

"By Astarte!" cried the satrap, "such a woman never graced this place since Jezebel. Aha! no little Ahab shall catch my wild pigeon. Have a care, Nicaso, who sets a snare for you!"

Her laugh rang merrily. "Be sure I shall keep myself bright and safe, like a new coin in the box, for the day of sale."

She looked between the swinging curtains.

"But here comes one handsome enough to be cup-bearer to you, father, when I have bought you a throne. I will be gone. Only don't sell me through him. He is a merchant. One, two, three camels, heavily laden, and himself on horse-back. He could trinket me out fit for Tammuz himself, I have no doubt. And, father," she threw her arms fondly about his neck, "just a necklace, or an anklet, or an armband, or a cap of coins! I will sell better for an ornament."

The girl disappeared through the rear of the pavilion into the palace enclosure. Sanballat rose to welcome his visitor at the entrance.

The traveller dismounted from his horse, and made a low salam, which the satrap returned as cordially as his reserve of official dignity permitted.

"I am Marduk, servant, if you will permit, to my Lord Sanballat," said the stranger.

"Ah, Marduk of Tyre! Your fame as a merchant has come before you. Welcome, good Marduk of Tyre."

"I hardly deserve the title 'from Tyre,' for many months have passed since I worshipped Melkarth in his temple there. I am rather a citizen of the world. The Isles of Greece, the Nile to the Cataracts, the shores of the Red Sea, the lands of Ammon and Moab, and even Jerusalem, might claim me."

"The more welcome, then," replied Sanballat. "The proverb says: 'A travelled man is a wise man,' but it ought to have said, if he did not linger too long in Jerusalem; for only fools are there. Shake off the dust of the Jews' land, and make one of us, good Marduk."

Servants relieved the stranger of his upper garment and sandals; they brought water and washed his feet. Others offered refreshments, of which Sanballat partook with his guest.

"And what land pleases you best?" asked the host, as they lingered over the cup of wine.

"No land is fairer than Samaria, my lord. Your fields are richer than I have seen for many a day. The vale of Shechem, by which I entered your domain, is a place where the gods might be pleased to abide with men. As I looked up to the heights of Gerizim I could well believe the legend that there rather than on the hill where the Jews have put their temple, the great Father Abraham offered the sacrifice of his son."

"A sacrifice that Jehovah would not accept," said Sanballat, sneeringly; "but He preferred a ram as something nobler than a Jew. Baal did accept the sacrifice of the heroic Prince of Tyre. Ah! he was worthy of the god's feast even without being roasted—eh, Marduk? But don't take offence. I meant no irreverence to Baal. I believe in Baal as much as you do."

"I do not doubt it," replied Marduk.

"Yes, I worship Baal," continued Sanballat, scarcely pausing. "That is, as a Moabite I worship Baal-Chemosh; but in this land of ancient Israel I have to keep on good terms with Jehovah, or, as I should call him, Baal of Israel."

"That is wise," replied Marduk. "I have studied closely the strange people at Jerusalem. They are truly possessed by their God. Jehovah is a reality among these hills, whatever he may be elsewhere."

"Yes," said Sanballat, "Jehovah is a god of the hills. Baal can't match him there. But down on the coast, in your country, Jehovah cannot keep a foothold."

"Have you noted," interrupted Marduk, "how the power of the Jews is growing? Thousands of them, once scattered among all countries, are returning. They are bringing with them great wealth, and are building the waste places. The enthusiasm for revived Israel is like a disease that floats in the air over many lands, and fastens on those who are susceptible; and every Jew from Babylon to Gades is in the catching condition. I wonder that you do not make an alliance with them; and reap in their harvest, my Lord Sanballat?"

"Reap their harvest! That I would—with a torch. Think you, Marduk! I have offered these miserable Jews my friendship. Even offered to help them build their city. But their ass-headed stubbornness would not listen to me. There was a time when I could have cut all their throats, and yet I spared them."

Sanballat strode up and down the apartment. When he had worked off the froth of his passion the native cunning of the man asserted itself, and, sitting down close to his guest, he studied his face for a moment. You said, Make an alliance? Is it possible?"

"Possible! Why not?" replied Marduk. "Only Ezra and Nehemiah have heretofore prevented, and now Ezra is like an old dog who keeps his spirit but has lost his teeth. He cannot hold on to affairs long. And as for Nehemiah, the Tirshatha, he is enamoured of the feasts at the palace of Susa, and shows no sign of coming back."

"The Tirshatha! A curse on that mongrel Persian and Jewish dog!"

Sanballat took another turn about the room, as uneasy as a chained bear with a dog snapping at his legs. The exercise clarified his half-drunken wits, and he resumed the council.

"Ezra's teeth may be broken, but that whelp Nehemiah's teeth are sharp enough. But for him I should now have my palace on the hill of Zion, and my soldiers be encamped in the valley of Jehosaphat. Then, think of it, Marduk! mine should be the satrapy from Syria to Egypt."

"The thing is possible yet," replied Marduk. "There is no ruler now in Jerusalem. The high priest's family are chief in influence. They are jealous of Nehemiah, and do not want him back from Susa. They are ready to strengthen themselves in any way. They are already scratching the ambitious itch of Tobiah, the Ammonite. They have torn out the walls between the priest's chambers to make state quarters for his impudence in the very temple itself."

"Humph! Tobiah cannot help them," said Sanballat.

"But he can help himself by them," replied Marduk.

"He shall not."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Why not?" Sanballat was again upon his feet, and shook his fist in the face of Marduk, as if the guest were the hated Tobiah. "Why not? Because"—he fairly shrieked out his spleen—"because he is an Ammonite. Moab must have the ascendancy in this land, so far as Persia allows either of us to rule. The blood of every man of Moab would turn to adder's poison if Tobiah were anything higher than the servant of Sanballat."

"Then prevent him."

"Prevent him! I shall, or may the fire of Chemosh burn me! But, good Marduk, tell me how you would do it."

"Why, by offering better alliance with the priests myself. The rising man in Jerusalem in Manasseh. He is grandson of Eliashib, the high priest. He is as astute as Nehemiah, and more popular. If the Tirshatha does not come back, Manasseh will be proclaimed governor. If Nehemiah should return, Manasseh, by virtue of his priestly rank, must be the man of his right hand."

"Grandson of Eliashib? Then he is still young, and unmarried."

"Yes."

Sanballat took a long turn about the apartment. Seating himself again, he put his head close to Marduk's.

"You have seen my daughter?"

"I have heard of her beauty. It is famed everywhere."

Good blood will come to the cheek as well as put strength into the arm. They say she is a sprig of yourself, my Lord Sanballat."

"Woe to the man that should say differently," replied the Moabite, feeling the flattery. "Is Manasseh comely, well-built, strong; or a sleek priest that dare not draw a knife but on a bullock?"

"No man is better gifted in body or mind than Manasseh. Far be it from me, a stranger, to suggest such a thing to my Lord Sanballat; but since you have first mentioned it, I make bold to say that there is no alliance so permanent between rulers as an alliance of blood. As the blood gives a common life to all the body, and prevents the parts from falling asunder through disagreement, so it is with an alliance of blood among nations. Besides, such a union with one who is to be high priest would modify the strictness of the Jews' religion, and lead to some common code of worship in which Jehovah and Baalite might unite. I foresee from that a new Syria, its people one, its ruler Sanballat, and its great temple here in Samaria, or, perhaps, upon Mount Gerizim itself. All Phœnicia might be brought into such a confederation. Think of the riches of Tyre and Sidon, the stronghold of Jerusalem, the great tribes across the Jordan, perhaps Damascus, all under the suzerainty of Samaria!"

Sanballat was carried away with this conceit, which it was evident Marduk had only revived in his mind, not suggested. He strode to the palace front, and looked out over the hills. His eyes widened as if taking in the vision of his new empire. Marduk followed him. The satrap put his arm fondly about his guest.

"You speak as the Jews say Daniel did in Babylon when he told the king his dream, for what you say has been my waking vision for years, yet I have breathed it to none. And why should it not be accomplished?"

"It may be, and you yourself have suggested the first stitch in the new fabric—the union of your house with that of the high priest."

"Well said, Marduk! Well said! I would see the young man. No father can fix the stars for his child's destiny until he sees if they reflect themselves brightly in her heart. If Nicaso should evince repugnance to the Jew, or he should not be taken with the charms of a Moabite—"

"Impossible! Impossible to either, when they meet! Two such comely persons must love at sight. Besides, they could not resist the wooing of great State necessities, ambition for the glory of rank and power, and the praise which we can make sure each shall hear of the other, even before they meet."

"Marduk, you are a statesman, worthy of the repute of your King Hiram, whom Baal has taken to himself; for they say he was the wisest man that ever sat in the council of Tyre. Draw up the compact, Marduk. You merchants know the form. We will study it at our leisure, for you are to be my guest until you return to Jerusalem with authority to consummate the union of Nicaso and Manasseh; of Nicaso and Manasseh! The names sound well together. Ay, the union of Samaria and Judah, of Sanballat and all Syria!"

Sanballat was in high spirits. He ordered a jar of the wine of Hebron, "the only wine the King of Persia will drink, but not too good for Marduk and the Satrap of Samaria, of Syria." He called for his captains and distributed among them a skin of beer, the brewing of Damascus. Dancers were summoned; men who, balancing pitchers and jars of water upon their heads, took their steps dexterously between the waving blades of swords; and women who exhibited every possible grace of motion with their bodies, while allowing only the slightest motion of their feet. Horsemen performed marvellous exploits. The camel-drivers added their share to the hilarity by attempting to imitate these equestrian movements upon their awkward beasts. A score or two of asses were forced into orchestral braying by tickling their noses, and brought to a sudden silence by twisting their tails.

As the crowd withdrew to regale themselves with a largess of leben, the daughter of the satrap appeared. Her maidens spread an elegant rug, wrought on the looms of Téhara, a gift to the satrap from Artaxerxes.

Nicaso's entire person was covered with a long veil. Though it was supposed to hide her features, it coquettishly revealed not only enough to assure Marduk that the fame of her beauty was warranted, but also to make him feel that her part of the entertainment was not altogether due to obedience to her father's wish, but was also a gratuitous compliment to his presence.

A harp was brought to her. To its accompaniment she sang a song based upon the legendary love of Solomon for the Shulamite maiden, his wooing and her rejection of royal favours through constancy to her shepherd lover. Nicaso's voice was exceedingly rich and flexible. It well represented the gentler sentiments; but was startlingly effective in its deeper tones, which were adapted to the wilder portions of the song, and suggested an untamed element in the singer herself.

"A glorious bit of womanhood," thought Marduk; "but I would rather Manasseh had the responsibility of owning it than I."

He turned to speak to the satrap, but that worthy, overcome by the abundance and mixture of drinks, was fast asleep, if not drunk. It will be well to drop the curtain briefly upon Samaria.

(To be continued.)

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