

## Choice Literature.

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## A KING OF TYRE.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

The time came for Hiram's departure from the home of Ben Yusef.

"There is one favour more I would claim from the hands of my protector," said he to the old man. "You have been a father to us; we would have a father's blessing in making us one. Let me receive my bride from your hands."

"Let me look into your eyes," replied Ben Yusef. "Now as Jehovah liveth, and as thy soul liveth and feareth the curse of its creator, answer me truly. Does any other woman than this one hold your vow? Our first father Adam commanded that 'a man should leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and they twain should be one flesh.'"

Marduk, following the custom of oath-taking among Jews and Phœnicians alike, placed his hand beneath the thigh of Ben Yusef, and declared:—

"As Jehovah liveth, no woman but this one ever heard vow from me."

"And she? Is she thy betrothed, and thine alone? Does her father live? and has he given his child into thy keeping? For I can stand as father to her only as I am assured that I transgress no sacred law of fatherhood among Jews or Gentiles."

"Her father once solemnly betrothed her to me according to the laws of our people," replied Marduk, "In his presence I placed upon her hand the ring of betrothal she wears."

"It is enough," said Ben Yusef. "And may this woman bring thee the blessing that my own Lyda brought me when I took her from the tent of Terah, her father."

Several days later the home of Ben Yusef was transformed into a place of festivity. The old terebinth was hung with garlands. A booth was erected at a little distance from the family tent. Though very simple in structure, it was lined with rich stuffs that well depleted the stores of Marduk, the merchant. These were arranged by Eliezar, the Damascene, whose ingenuity had never before been so taxed to fill the order of any merchant as it was by the order of Marduk to prepare the nuptial tent. The broad divan was covered with that rare fabric of white wool, grown on the slopes of the Lebanon, and called "damask" from the looms of Damascus, that weave its fine fibres, and prepare them for the rich red colour of the dyer. It was curtained with lace, the handiwork of a Syrian peasant woman, and into the elaborate pattern of which had gone many years of her toil. She could have indicated certain knots that were made when her eyes were full of tears for some affliction; others wrought when her fingers flew nimbly as she hastened her daily task in order to meet some expected pleasure. Oh! if one could only unravel the secrets of the lives of the workers, and tell the thoughts they had as they toiled, as one can unravel the stitches, what history we would have!—a thousand times larger and a thousand times deeper than that preserved in the annals of our kings!

There was a mirror of polished brass, set in a frame of silver, the craft of Sidonians. And such a toilet of necklaces and ear-rings, of gemmed brooches and hair-pins, of bracelets and anklets; such a collection of tiny vases of rock crystal, of bronze, of glass, of alabaster, all containing Kohl for colouring the eyebrows, or salves for the lips, or perfumes for the clothing. There was such a wardrobe of shawls and tunics, veils and sandals! Even Eliezar could not describe them all, for he had left the selection of these to Hador, the haberdasher to the King of Damascus.

During the day Zillah had been invisible. The mysteries of her apartment in the tent of Ben Yusef we must leave to the imagination of our fair readers, and to the knowledge of Ruth, who waited upon her.

As the day waned, many shepherds of the neighbourhood, with their families, came to join in the festivities; for to salute a new-made bride was thought to bring blessing upon one's own household.

Just as the sun went down Marduk emerged from his booth, arrayed in gay robes and crowned with myrtle, entwined with roses. His garments were redolent with myrrh and frankincense, and verily, as Solomon described the comely bridegroom, with "all the powders of the merchant."

The peasants formed in procession to escort the bridegroom from his tent to that of Ben Yusef, at the door of which, as it was her temporary home, he would receive his bride, and conduct her to his own dwelling.

Scarcely had the procession begun to move when it was suddenly halted by an exclamation of surprise and caution from Elnathan. On top of the hill had appeared a band of horsemen. Elnathan darted into the great tent and reappeared with a number of swords, knives, slings and such bludgeons as made every tent an arsenal in those troublous times. The peasants were quickly armed, even some of the women taking weapons.

Elnathan advanced to meet the intruders, who had halted upon the hill top, as if they were reconnoitring the scene or waiting for others to join them. One of the horsemen was clad in the dull russet leathern suit which indicated a Phœnician soldier. Another wore a white, close-fitting tunic, and the projecting cap of a Persian. A third was dressed more as one of the wild rovers of Moab, in big turban and flowing burnoose.

The three awaited Elnathan's challenge, and answered it with, "Peace be with thee!" then dashed down the hill-side with a cry in three divers tongues, "Marduk! Marduk! Marduk!"

"Hanno!" cried Marduk, and had nearly pulled the Phœnician from his horse before he caught the admonition of his friend, and repeated louder: "It is Captain Beto, of Sidon, as sure as Baal lives!"

"Just as sure!" was the response. The second comer was a stranger to Marduk, but at once recognized by Elna-

than as the Persian officer in whose escort he had come down the valley of the Litany. The third was a Sidonial soldier from the house of Sanballat. A few words sufficed to explain their coming.

It was necessary for Hanno to communicate with Marduk concerning matters that could be safely intrusted to no one else, so he had assumed the disguise of a soldier and sought his friend.

"But I would never have found you in this retreat, though I thought I knew the way from your description, had it not been that I fell in with these good men, and discovered that this noble Persian, who was returning from Jerusalem to Susa, by way of Samaria, was directing this servant of our Lord Sanballat to find Marduk. But woe betide the man who interrupts a marriage ceremony! Let us all be friends of the bridegroom."

The new-comers joined with the merry peasants. The procession was re-formed, and, with Marduk at the head, approached the great tent.

Ben Yusef met them at the door. He held Zillah by the hand. She was clothed in white, relieved by needlework of gold. Her robe was gathered at the waist by the kishshurim, or wedding girdle, to be loosed only by her husband. Her hair was unbound, flowing in a cascade of glossy jet. A crown of gold, beaten into the shape of ivy-leaves, was on her head. She wore a veil that hid her features, but fell about her form like a phosphorescence, concealing the sharper folds of her attire, but revealing their lines of grace.

Ben Yusef placed the hand of Zillah in that of Marduk, saying:—

"Take her according to the law of Moses and of Israel."

Then he added the blessing of the elders at the ancient marriage of Boaz and Ruth:—

"The Lord make the woman that is come into thy home like Rachael and Leah, which two did build the house of Israel."

Then Ruth pushed aside the veil just enough to kiss her, and, holding the bride's cheeks between her hands, repeated the extravagant blessing the family of Rebekah used when they gave her to the patriarch Isaac:—

"Thou art our sister; be thou the mother of thousands of millions; and let thy seed possess the gate of those that hate them."

The little crowd of peasants had in the meantime lighted flambeaux and small hand-lamps. Elnathan marshalled them into a procession, which, making a detour over the hill side, returned to the booth of Marduk. Here the couple entered. The crowd gathered under the terebinth, where, with feasting and songs, they made the night merry, until the east dropped its gray dawn upon them without a cloud—which they interpreted into a happy omen for the newly-wedded—and, with a hundred shouted well-wishes to the merchant and his bride, they dispersed to their homes.

The Persian officer rejoined his own company. The soldier from Sanballat, who carried a letter to Marduk from Manassen, set out upon his return. "Captain Beto" seemed to forget the proprieties of the occasion, and made himself a companion of Marduk and his wife during almost all the first day of their wedded life. The three sat under the terebinth, or walked together over the hill; the devoted couple apparently as deeply interested in their visitor as in each other.

Whether their interest in "Captain Beto's" talk was warranted or not, we must leave the reader to judge. He told of events in Phœnicia, some of which are recited in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

After Ahimelek's horrid curses upon his daughter, he remained in a stupor during the day and night. When the morning broke, the servants found him sitting in a corner of his apartment in the inn of Gebal with his arms folded as if clasping some object, and talking incoherently:—

"Don't go, Zillah, my pretty one! There now! Sleep again! You will not hate your father when you grow to be a queen, will you? Kiss me again. A curse! a curse! a curse on him who will touch a hair of my Zillah! What are those men pushing with their poles? Save her! Give her to me, Layah!"

Then followed a long period of weeping. Like a child, at last he cried himself to sleep.

Late in the day he awoke. He was a changed man. His hair had grown perceptibly whiter. His face was ashen-hued. From middle life he had passed suddenly into senility and imbecility. The terrible excitement had seemingly burned out his brain.

For some days he refused to leave Gebal. When at length he set out, and came to the river Adonis, he was held by some spell from crossing it. As his litter-bearers rested by the bank, he leaped from his carriage, and ran hither and thither, searching with wild eyes into every pool.

He then made them convey him to the coast, where the ruddy waters of the river mingle with the Great Sea. There he paced the shores, wringing his hands, now praying, now cursing. Egbalus and Rubaal were especially the objects of his imprecation.

They brought him to Tyre. He shut himself in his house. For days he was invisible. Captains in the harbour delayed their sailing, awaiting orders from him as the owner of their craft, which orders never came. Merchants from Sidon, with whom he was interested in joint ventures, returned enraged at his neglect of most pressing business.

The first to gain access to him was Hanno. From boyhood Ahimelek had known and liked the genial comrade of young Hiram; and now that he must have some one to speak with, yet feared everybody else, he bethought him of Hanno.

There was something of the old-time welcome of Ahimelek as his guest appeared.

"Enter, my son! my boy, Hanno!" said he, throwing his arms affectionately about the stalwart young man. Then he looked at the dignified form, the serious face of the visitor, and, as if suddenly recollecting himself, made profound obeisance, remaining with head bowed for a moment.

"My Lord Hanno! priest of Astarte, to be high priest of Baal-Melkarth! I worship your presence."

"Simple Hanno, if you will," was the reassuring reply.

The wretched man put his hands on Hanno's shoulders and scanned his face, as if making an effort at recollection.

"I—I knew you when a child, did I not? In this room you have played. With these same old swords and helmets

you have played. Hiram and Hanno played, and I—I let them. I never told them not to play."

"Yes, you were a good friend to me and—to Hiram."

"Was I?" said the man with delight. "And you have not cursed me, as a priest have not cursed me, because I was good to you when a boy? And you will not curse me?"

"No! no! noble Ahimelek! There have been cursings enough. But you sent for me?"

"Ah, yes. I remember. Hanno! priest Hanno!"

He drew his friend to him, and studied his face again, as if half in fear that sudden lightning might flash from it and blast him.

"Hanno! priest Hanno! can you see the gods?"

Hanno hesitated a moment, as if balancing the reply between honesty and some plan he had of using the superstition of Ahimelek, and then replied:—

"I have seen all the gods there are."

"Have you seen Hiram, Baal-Hiram, since—the sacrifice?"

"Yes."

"He really lives?"

"Yes."

"Is blessed of Baal?"

"Yes."

There was a long pause. Ahimelek's face went through a series of contortions. With husky, hesitating speech, looking against the blank wall, as if questioning himself rather than his visitor, he stammered out:—

"And Zillah? She went to Hiram?"

"She is with Hiram."

"You can see her?"

"I have seen her."

"Does she curse her father?"

"No, she is too happy with Hiram for that."

"Baal be praised!"

Raising his arm, he would have embraced Hanno, but his emotion was too much for him, and he fell across the divan.

Hanno lifted him kindly, and clasped his hands for a servant, who gave Ahimelek a cup of wine.

The old man was in a loquacious mood.

"Captain Hanno, they are robbing me."

"Who?"

Egbalus, King Rubaal, my captains, my camel-drivers—everybody. They will have every ship, every jewel, every daric. Save me, Hanno! I'll pay you well. Come, see what they would take!"

He drew one end of the divan away from the wall, took out a panel of the carved wainscoting of the room, and from a little chest drew by main strength a heavy bronze box.

"In this are more precious things than elsewhere in all Phœnicia. For years my captains have been commissioned to purchase the most splendid gems. Some of these singly cost all the freight of a bireme to Gades."

Then he whispered, as he tapped the box lovingly with his finger:—

"The great diamond of Xerxes, that the Persians are searching for, is here. A handful of rubies, too, that a Greek gave me, to keep my ships in the far western sea, so that the Persian levy would be lessened. Ah! if my ships had been at Eurymedon, the battle might have gone differently. And you should see the gift of Megabyses for my influence in keeping the men of Tyre from going to help the Sidonians when the city was besieged. Oh! I have been a great man, Hanno, in my day; quiet merchant Ahimelek, as they thought me; a great man! a great man! And the harvest of forty years is in that box. Did you hear what young Ezmunazer, Prince of Sidon, is having carved on the coffin they are making for him? It is, 'Curse the man that moves my bones.' I have guarded this box with all the spells the witches know of, and put ten thousand curses upon him who should touch it. But now, Hanno, they are going to take it away."

The old man cried like a whipped child, and clutched his treasure-box.

"Who can take it without your consent, Ahimelek? Our laws will prevent any robbery by day, and you have strong watchmen by night," said Hanno, encouragingly.

"No, but look here! read this!"

He drew from a heap of papyrus and parchments a document. It proved to be a copy of his dowry agreement in espousing his daughter Zillah to Rubaal. He pledged to the prospective king the equivalent in gems of a thousand minas of gold, together with half the revenue of his ships; making Rubaal withal partner in all his enterprises. With this enormous price he thought to buy into his own family the throne of Tyre.

"But your document is surely invalid, since your daughter has not become the wife of Rubaal," said Hanno.

"Such were but the just interpretation; but Rubaal holds that from the day of the espousal the dowry was due; that it became his then, the death of Zillah being as the death of his real wife. And the great councillors all hold with Rubaal. The Shophetim can assure me of no relief. To-morrow they come to make good the claim. To-morrow! Oh, good Hanno! priest Hanno, help me!"

Hanno thought a moment and replied:—

"Ahimelek, is Rubaal king yet? He has not been crowned yet, and may never be. Let this be secret between us. I am assured that the Great King, Artaxerxes, has expressed displeasure with Rubaal; and surely the Tyrians will not crown a king who will not be recognized at Susa and receive the appointment as suffete under Persia: otherwise Persia would send an officer of her own, and our king would be in disgrace. Tabnit of Sidon, too, refuses to recognize Rubaal. We dare not break with our brethren the Sidonians. I assure you, Ahimelek, that Rubaal will never be crowned. You must not allow this wealth to come into his hands. Never!"

"How can I prevent it? They will force my house. It may be this very night. And once possessing this, they will have money enough to buy the pleasure of the Great King."

"The gems must be secreted," said Hanno.

"But where?"

"Out of the land; under the care of some other god; for Baal will show them, as he shows everything, to his priests. They should be sent across the seas, or over into Jehovah's land."

"To hide them in some cave, or bury them in some wood? No, no. I would not rest day or night lest they should be discovered."

"Put them under the care of the god of the land, then. I can arrange that matter as priest of Astarte with the priests of Jehovah."