

Choice Literature.

THE SPELL OF ASHTAROTH.

BY DUFFIELD OSBORNE.

CHAPTER I.—THE STANDARD OF THE LION.

Night had closed in over the camp of Israel. The sun had sunk to rest behind the mountain chain that lay to the west; and the moon, a thin silver crescent emblematic of the promised increase of the people of God, had risen languidly from behind the hilly ramparts of Abarim and begun her journey through the starry hordes that flashed and flickered in the cloudless heaven.

An endless waste of dark tents, hundreds upon hundreds, thousands upon thousands, bewildered the eye as they lay spread from far down the eastern plain almost to the fringes of the palms, from the midst of whose lofty embrace rose the long sweep of embattered walls and the massive towers looming heavenward until their watchfires seemed to mingle with the constellations of the western horizon.

For ten days had that camp had been set before the City of Palms. Six times had the chosen warriors marched grimly around the frowning buttresses. Six times had the Kohathites borne the Ark of God behind the men of war, while the seven rams'-horns, the horns of jubilee, had flung out their blasts of defiant triumph, and the people had gazed and wondered; for had not the Lord commanded, "Ye shall not shout nor make any noise until the day I bid ye shout?"

And now Israel rested in their tents and waited eagerly for the morrow, when their God should deliver the city into their hands according as He had declared.

At the extreme eastward of the long stretch of rising ground on which the camp lay, and near to one of the openings which seemed as gates in the eastern rampart, the sole defensive work, a large standard swung from a heavy pole deep sunken in the ground. Now it hung listlessly in the still night air, and now lazily unwrapped its folds as some transient breeze stooped from the mountains to caress it. In the clear night of Palestine it seemed of several colours, rich with embroideries, and bearing in its midst the figure of a lion, the well-known cognizance of the tribe of Judah. Keen eyes, too, as the banner from time to time floated out to its full length, might have deciphered the motto, "Who shall rouse him up?" with its calm assurance of power.

Leaning against the staff was the figure of a man. He seemed at least fifty years of age. His head was bare, and his hair and his beard flowed down over a mantle of some dark stuff, entirely devoid of ornament. His tunic of coarse linen, reaching to the knee, half indicated, half exposed a figure tall, gaunt and sinewy. A long heavy spear was thrust into the earth near him, and on it hung a shield of oblong shape, but broader and rounder at the top. Its outer surface, the untanned hide of a bullock, was fastened down over a wooden frame strengthened at the top by a rim of bronze. The hilt of a sword girt to his left side peeped from under the robe which was thrown backward over his shoulders. He seemed a hardy veteran of the desert, scarred by the sword of Midian and toughened by march and countermarch in the trackless wilderness—a fitting type of the adventurous race that slumbered around him.

His comrade was strikingly his opposite—a young man, scarcely over twenty, beardless, and with a face at once beautiful, haughty and high-spirited. The eyes were large, dark and keen; the black hair, flowing from under a brass helmet of Moabitish pattern, fell in heavy curls over his shoulders; the nose clean cut, broad at the nostrils, and slightly aquiline; the mouth firm and determined, and the chin delicately rounded, perhaps too much so to be in thorough keeping with what was otherwise a strong face. His figure, tall, straight and muscular, though slender and graceful, was clothed in the usual tunic reaching to the knees, which in this instance was made of the finest white linen, elaborately embroidered and fringed. Over it was a corselet of leather strengthened with bands of copper riveted together, encircling the body from the waist to the arm-pits, and joined by pieces of similar metal passing over both shoulders. A rich mantle, also heavily embroidered and fringed, was lying at his feet, and his shield on the ground beside him was similar in shape to that of his companion, but the leather had been carefully tanned and polished till it shone almost like metal. A long spear pointed with the rough horn of an oryx was in his hand, and the ordinary short two-edged sword of the Jewish soldier hung in a leathern scabbard at his side.

He stood with his figure drawn up erect and soldierly, in marked contrast to the easy, lounging posture of him who joined him in keeping guard over the gate and standard.

The older warrior eyed his companion for a time, half in admiration and half with an air of superior age and experience. Finally he broke the silence:

"Boy! I would advise thee to loosen that corselet of thine, and, if thou wilt not rest with me, yet stand not so rigid; for, if the rumours speak truth, to-morrow will need all the strength and agility thou canst collect, and it were not meet for thee to worry thyself with needless toil. Thinkest thou the heathen meditate a night attack? If the eyes of Ozias be true, no war will come from Jericho to Israel. Didst thou not note how that when six days ago we compassed their walls, they laughed and jeered at us; and how that three days ago they cursed and shouted? But to-day a great hush fell upon them, and I could well nigh mark the spear tips trembling on their towers. The Lord has smitten their hearts with terror, and thou shouldst keep thee fresh for the work of the morrow."

"Nay now, Ozias," answered the youth; "it were not well for me to recline or to lay aside my arms when the captain bade me keep watch with thee over the degal."

"As thou wishest, O Adriel," replied Ozias, testily; for there was implied reproach in the words of his companion; "but when thou hast watched and fought for over thirty years thou wilt look less to the manner of thy service, so thou servest well and faithfully." Adriel made no answer, but gazed out over the plain, dotted here and there with clumps of acacias and stretching down to the Jordan.

At last he turned to Ozias, and, in a voice half petulant, and half evincing a desire to mollify the veteran by an appeal to his military opinion, asked:

"What thinkest thou of the progress of the siege?"

"Wherefore askest thou?" said Ozias; "wouldst thou improve on the plans of Joshua the son of Nun?"

"That I would!" answered Adriel, stung by the ironical tone of the other. "What honour is there in Israel marching endlessly before these walls with trumpets, and priests and the Ark? Pity that the captain did not add dancing-girls to the train, such as I have heard they have in Egypt. Is it to make us a laughing-stock and a reproach to the people of the land? Would to God I had the command even for one day. I would show Israel different work. Had we mounted up and stormed their walls when we first came, not a man had dared to lift sword or draw bow against us; and if he had, the greater the honour to Israel and its God."

Ozias had endeavoured to interrupt this fiery outbreak, and now he spoke, not tauntingly as before, but gravely and reproachfully:

"Dost thou not see, my son, that it is not Joshua whom thou condemnest, but God? Is it not well said that the earthly captain of Israel doth but obey the commands of the heavenly? and wherefore shouldst thou, a boy in war, cast reproach upon the Lord of Hosts?"

But Adriel, unabashed, made answer boldly:

"Say what thou wilt, Ozias, it is a womanish way of making war."

Ozias spoke more sternly.

"Have a care how others hear thee speak as thou hast to-night. Thy words have a dangerous ring, and blasphemy is no sportive charge. Mark how thick the stones lie on the plain, and be cautious."

Adriel would have answered again, but at that moment a man, clothed only in a tunic, was seen running toward them from the direction of the centre of the camp. Both guards turned, and the youth's fingers tightened on the shaft of his spear, while he half stooped to pick up the shield which lay at his feet, but the runner, not noticing the motion, turned to the older man and said:

"The peace of God be upon thee! Art thou Ozias, the son of Zadok, of the tribe of Judah?"

"I am he."

"Then listen! Joshua, the son of Nun, bids thee come to him before his tent, for he would speak to thee of the morrow's work."

Ozias wrapped his mantle around him, and, waving his hand to Adriel, said: "Add my spear and shield to thy charge, boy." Then he hurried away with the messenger toward the centre of the camp.

Adriel stood alone and gazed now at the star-bespangled firmament, now at the slender thread of the river that wound along the eastern border of the plain. His mind wandered slowly from his heat and passion of a few moments ago, and from the rebuke of Ozias, to the stirring rumours with which the camp was rife, rumours of victory and conquest which the next day was to convert into realities. The spirit of youth and adventure rose high within him, and as he had chafed at the slow methods of the siege, so he now rejoiced at the prospect of action and prompt reward.

As he stood with shadowy thoughts his sole companions, he became conscious of the approach of a more material presence. Ere he could turn, a soft hand was laid upon his shoulder and a soft voice uttered his name.

"Adriel!"

"Miriam, art thou here?"

"I could not rest in the tent, Adriel, for I thought of thee and my father watching by the standard. I thought of the rumours that are in the camp, that to-morrow will see great deeds and mighty conquests: and thou, Adriel, art thou to be of those who will take part in the attack?"

"I trust so, Miriam," answered the young soldier, looking down into the dark, mournful eyes raised beseechingly to his. "Thou wouldst not have me linger in the camp when the Lord is leading Israel to victory?"

"Nay, I would not that—and yet—and yet—some of the people will fall, and thou art rash and violent."

Adriel laughed.

"Why, Miriam," he said, "what is that to thee? But two days since when I asked thee if my father might speak with thine that thou shouldst be betrothed to me, thou didst only laugh and run into thy tent. But to-morrow thou shalt see me mount the wall first, and if it please the Lord to guide an arrow or a stone toward His servant, thou shalt see it well received."

"Adriel!" replied the girl reproachfully, "thou knowest that I love thee. Whether I loved thee two days ago or even yesterday, I know not. But to-night—"

She was looking far away over the plain. His manner changed from light banter to seriousness and affection. He took her hand in his and drew her toward him.

"Miriam, girl," he said tenderly, "forgive me for trying to play on thy fears. Believe me, there will be little danger to-morrow. Some say that the city will be delivered into our hands without a blow. What are the men of Canaan that they should stand before our God? And look! Miriam, I am well defended. The helmet I took for spoil when I slew the Moabite in my first combat, and the corselet which my father's grandfather brought with him from the house of Memptah the Egyptian, are a better fence against the arrows and spears of Jericho than most of our people are provided with. But tell me, Miriam, may word go to thy father of the subject which is nearest my heart—nearer than Jericho and the spoil of the heathen, nearer than the land of promise, yea, nearer even than the tabernacle of God?"

"Hush! Adriel," interrupted the girl, "thou must not

speak so, though doubtless it be pleasant for me to hear."

He had drawn her still closer as he spoke. She did not resist; but when, as he smoothed the long black tresses that flowed loosely over her shoulders, he bent down and kissed her, she started, as though roused from some dream, and withdrawing herself from his arms, put up one finger with a warning gesture, in which feigned indignation and suppressed mirth struggled for the mastery. He stepped toward her holding out his arms.

"Then the word may be spoken, may it not, Miriam?"

But she evaded his advance and answered: "I must first learn how thou behavest to-morrow. Surely thou wouldst not have me betrothed to a rash boy who might leave me a widow even before I became a wife?" and then, suddenly changing her tone: "A pretty guard thou for the standard of Judah! The Canaanites might have carried it away in the last half hour and thou never have been the wiser, except they tried their spears on that harness of which thou art so proud. Is it thus every passing Jewish girl can draw thee from thy charge?"

"Nay, now, Miriam! Thou knowest—" but the girl, laughing merrily at thus having turned the tables on her lover, danced away, only saying, as he seemed to hesitate between following her and remaining in his place:

"Verily I believe this conscientious soldier would even desert his post in all his glittering harness could he catch me;" and then, more soberly as she disappeared into the night:

"Remember! I shall hear of thee to-morrow."

She was gone, and Adriel again stood alone.

He had short time for solitary thought, and perhaps it was well for him that it was so; for heart and brain were a chaos of conflicting hopes and fears. It was now the beginning of the middle watch, and he desisted approaching the two soldiers who should relieve him. A hasty salutation passed between them, and, catching up his own mantle together with the spear and shield of Ozias, he hurried off in the direction taken by Miriam.

Any idea which he might have entertained of overtaking the light-footed damsel was illusory. As he passed by the tent of Ozias he lingered to thrust his spear into the ground and to hang the shield upon it; but everything was quiet in and around the dark habitation, and, disappointed, he passed on to the tent of his father, where neither the excitement of the approaching battle nor the suspense of what he foolishly deemed a doubtful suit could overcome youth and health in their peaceful communion with the drowsy god.

CHAPTER II.—THE SEVENTH DAY.

One by one the watches of the night had glided away; but before a single star had deserted her sisters in their calm vigil, all was astir in the Jewish camp. Above the lowing of cattle, the bleat of flocks, and the voices of men, rose the shrill blasts of the silver trumpets summoning the warriors to don their arms and join their standards.

Adriel had arisen at the first summons, and, as he sprang from the skins on which he slept, a boy who had been standing at the entrance of the tent stepped toward him. His age could not have been over fourteen years, and he seemed to regard the young soldier with a curious combination of envy, admiration and devotion.

"How fares it with thee this morning, Abiathar? Is thy father arming?" asked Adriel.

"He has been out the last hour. Thou knowest that Ozias is high in the councils of Joshua; and now I have come to help thee put on thy harness, for all say that to-day will see the city in our hands."

"Even so, Abiathar. Wilt thou cleanse that spot from my helmet? Now bring me the corselet. So—lace it not too tight. How is it with thy sister Miriam?"

"She is well, and she badst me tell thee that whilst thou didst thy duty thou shouldst yet have a care, nor thrust thyself into needless danger. Girls know nothing of war. They tremble when they hear of great deeds. Didst thou mark how she turned pale when two days ago thou toldest how thou slewest the Moabite? And yet it was not the first time she had heard thee tell that tale. I would I might have held the sword that thou dravest under his ribs! And now to-day I must stay in the camp with the women and old men, while thou fighest, and thou knowest, Adriel, I can sling as true and as far as Zithri the Benjaminites. Ah! well, I shall find some tall palm and watch the battle from its branches, and tell Miriam what thou art doing. I will tell her thou hast fallen, and hear her cry out—"

"If thou dost I will chastise thee soundly when the day is over," interrupted Adriel hotly.

"Truly I did but jest, to see thee flare up," said Abiathar with a forced laugh.

"Nay, but it were like thee to do some such thing—not that Miriam would care, but—but—I would not—"

"Would not what?" asked the boy, this time with unaffected mirth. "Thou knowest not, but I know; it is vain for thee to feign that thou thinkest Miriam proof against the best soldier in the camp."

Adriel looked somewhat confused. Then, with an apparent effort, he shook the thoughts from his mind and said:

"But I cannot speak with thee longer, Abiathar. Look thou to Miriam. Hearest thou the trumpets? The people must be well under arms;" and, seizing spear and shield, he hurried out and joined one of the many groups of men hastening toward the western confines of the camp. The broad disk of the sun was only half displayed on the mountains of Abarim when they passed through the western gate and beyond the earthen ramparts.

Here the scene spread out before their eyes was one of confusion, but the signal blasts of the trumpets and the shouted words of command were fast arraying the people, rough though the array might be, and as Adriel hurried along the fast-forming lines to where he saw the standard of Judah encircled by dark masses of heavy-armed spearmen, his quick eyes ran over the arms and accoutrements of the rugged tribes that were to fight that day for their first foothold in the land.

(To be continued.)