

Choice Literature.

THE SPELL OF ASHTAROTH.

BY DUFFIELD OSBORNE.

CHAPTER IX.—THE SECOND NIGHT.

When the swiftly gathering darkness of the night had spread itself through the Hebrew camp, Adriel arose and, wrapped in a rough mantle with the end drawn over his head so as to shade his face from the gaze of inquisitive friends, stepped forth unobserved. He had dismissed Abiathar early in the evening under the pretence that his presence disturbed his rest, a reason which, shallow as it might be, the boy could not but regard; and now, with no weapon of offence or defence other than his sword which, together with a bottle of wine and some dates, lay concealed under his cloak, Adriel threaded his cautious path until he reached the rampart, and, crossing it, pursued his way over the plain toward the ruins of the fallen city.

As he drew near he quickened his pace, for the sounds he heard drove the blood back upon his heart and well-nigh froze him with horror. It was the howling of wolves and dogs; wolves that had descended from the mountains drawn by the scent of carrion, and dogs which, with none to feed them, were driven to dine off those who had been their masters; and now dog and wolf howled, snarled, and fought over the dainty banquet so richly spread for them. Adriel was now running at full speed. He had not thought of his captive being exposed to such a danger, and the horror of it pierced his very soul.

Climbing over the ruined wall, he sped up one of the narrow streets, scattering wolf and dog in his mad race, and as he turned a sharp corner, he suddenly burst upon a band of robbers who had come down from the mountains to seek such plunder as the invaders might have left. They were sitting in a circle, evidently dividing their gains, when this apparition bounded into the midst of them; but ere they had sprung to their feet and grasped their weapons he was gone.

"It is a spirit of the dead!" said their leader in trembling tones, and, hastily gathering up their booty, they made haste to regain their fastnesses.

The thought that wolf and dog were aided by such allies lent new wings to Adriel's speed until, with redoubled exertion, he at last reached the hut, and fainting and breathless sought its entrance.

A door formed of a single slab of stone working on pivots, and which he did not remember having noticed before, now closed the aperture. Within all was still.

Adriel's heart sank within him and for a moment he scarce gathered courage to knock or speak. At last he placed his shoulder to the door, swung it back, and entered.

Standing a moment until he became accustomed to the darkness, he saw the girl lying upon the couch and gazing at him with her great, sad eyes. Then she rose.

"Is it thou, my lord?" she said. "I knew not whether it might be one of thy people or some robber from the west who sought for me."

Adriel shuddered.

"And what if it had been?" he asked.

"I should have preferred the former. It would have meant no more than death," she answered simply, "and the wolves to either, for the door is strong enough for them. Had it been but one man," she resumed, with slow decision, "perchance I could have struck him down with the dagger ere his eyes had seen me in the darkness, and had there been more, it were but the work of an instant to make their capture a vain one."

He looked at her in admiration for a moment, and then, throwing back his mantle, drew forth the supplies he had brought with him and set them before her, saying:

"See, I have stolen from the camp to bring thee these, that thou mightest not want while thou art forced to remain here."

"And for how long will that be?" she asked.

"I know not," answered Adriel hurriedly. "Perchance until they move the camp up into the country, when thou mayest escape with safety toward the south. Tell me," he continued, as though to forestall her pressing the inquiry on a subject which could not but call to mind the difficulties of his enterprise—difficulties which he dreaded to contemplate—"tell me something of thyself and people. There is short time when I can safely remain here, and I would fain learn who thou art."

For a moment the girl was silent, and seemed to struggle to keep down the tears that threatened to appear. Then she turned to Adriel.

"There is little for me to tell," she said. "Doubtless thou has heard of the mighty Kara-in-das, the king who rules far away to the east in Babylon, a city to which my father has told me that this Jericho was but a hovel. Thence was it that my father came hither years ago on a mission from our great king, that he should send him word how that matters went upon the coast, and should attend that caravans from the East received due hospitality. My brother was then very young, and I first saw the light here."

"For many years Uruk, my father, kept hoping that he would be recalled to Babylon, the city he loved; but when the king sent word that he should remain and build him a palace suitable for the envoy of so great a monarch, he composed himself to a life of honoured exile, and all he saw of home was when he would tell me tales of the grandeur of the great city; of her walls and palaces and temples and hanging gardens; of the wealth and might of her kings; of the numbers and valor of her warriors, and of their coats of mail, and black, curled beards; the beauty of her women, the power of the gods that kept guard over her safety, and how the people worshipped them with great festivals and sacrifices. Had I sacrificed to Ashtaroth after the manner our maidens are compelled to do in Babylon, perchance evil fortune had not befallen us, and I should not now be the captive of thy hand."

"Rather," replied Adriel quickly, "am I thine. For do I not peril my life that thou mayest escape?"

"And I have told thee that it were a foolish act."

"Of that I must judge," said he proudly; and then, as though to change the trend of her thoughts, "thou hast told me thy father's name, maiden, but I know not yet what is thine."

"I am called Elissa."

"It is a name we know not among my people," he said, absently, "but it soundeth musical on mine ear;" and then he fell to musing, with eyes fast fixed on vacancy.

At length, arousing himself as though from a dream, and springing hastily up, he said:

"I must leave thee how, else they may miss me in the camp, and questions be asked that it were difficult for me to reply to. Do thou keep thy door fast shut against beasts. Men, I am persuaded, thou needest not fear. The robber would give this hut no second glance; only be thou wary. I will return to thee again."

He was gone, and the girl, once more alone with her thoughts in the midst of that ghastly solitude, strove to kill the feeling of utter despair that surged in her heart and made the events of the preceding days seem like a huge dream that must melt away at the rising of the morning sun.

CHAPTER X.—THE SUMMONS TO BATTLE.

Ozias lay sleeping upon his couch as the night wore on into the morning watch.

Of a sudden he became conscious of men entering his tent and standing beside him, and, springing quickly up, he sought instinctively for the sword that hung near his head.

But a well-known voice exclaimed, "Peace be with thee, Ozias!" while another said:

"Hold, father; it is Achan, who would fain speak with thee of Adriel," and Ozias, half ashamed of his ready distrust, bade Achan to be seated, and ordered Abiathar that he should set bread before the visitor; but Achan waved aside the proffered hospitality, and turning to Ozias, said, in a troubled voice:

"Ozias, I have sought thee that we might speak together concerning my son. Well into the beginning of the watches he drove this boy of thine from his tent, and when the boy returned later to see how Adriel slept, behold he was gone. Then it was that Abiathar sought me, and together we ranged through the camp that preadventure we might find him we sought, but without avail, and returning at last to his tent, we waited."

"As the middle watch wore on we heard footsteps approaching, and then the curtain of the tent was thrown aside and Adriel entered. You should have seen the wild look in his eye, like to the eyes of one that walketh in his sleep, and his garments and sandals were clotted with the mire of the plain, his hair bedraggled with the dew. He did not seem to see us, but staggered toward the couch as a man weary from hard travel, and throwing himself upon it closed his eyes without a word of greeting or explanation. Of a truth, Ozias, I believe the young man to be possessed of a devil that drives him forth on such mad and meaningless journeyings."

The face of Ozias darkened, and turning to Abiathar, he asked:

"Hast thou watched him well of late, as I bade thee?"

"Even so, father," replied the boy, "but he has seemed to chafe at my presence, to speak harshly, and, even as Achan has told, last night the evil spirit within him compelled me to go forth, peradventure that I might not know whither it drove him."

"Wherefore didst thou not lie in wait and follow his steps?"

"Truly I feared to, for Adriel is quick of eye and ear, and he looked so grim when he sent me away that I doubt not the evil spirit would have slain me had I dared to trace him."

"Tush!" said Ozias scornfully. "I thought that thou didst deem thyself swift of foot?"

"Thou sayest truly, but thou knowest Adriel. He would have been upon me ere I had run a hundred paces."

"What thinkest thou, Ozias?" asked Achan impatiently.

"I know not what to think. Peradventure some woman hath wound her snares around his heart."

"Nay, that cannot be, for I have been minded to speak to thee for many days how that thou shouldst betroth to him thy daughter, Miriam. I know his heart goes out to her alone of all maidens."

"And I have met thee with a prompt assent, for I love the boy well; and now—we must set a watch upon him, and then shall we see whether or not there be reason for his madness."

As Ozias finished speaking there was heard a trampling of feet without the tent, and a voice called:

"Ozias, come forth! I that speak to thee am Caleb, the son of Jephunneh."

Ozias and Achan sprang to their feet and issued out into the dim light of the early morning, while Abiathar sped back to keep watch near the tent of Adriel.

"What wouldst thou with thy servant?" asked Ozias, as he stood before the lieutenant of Joshua.

"This:" was the prompt answer. "The spies who went forth have but just returned to me, and they have told their story to the Captain, how that the hearts of the men of Ai are fainting within their breasts at the news of our entrance into the land. It were a needless toil to lead the host up against them, for they will fall of their own weakness before the first blast of our trumpets. But the Captain bids me tell thee that thou take with thee three thousand men, a number equal to the warriors that the city can muster. Select whom thou wilt, and go up through the pass in the hills and smite them with the edge of the sword, and leave not one stone upon another. When wilt thou go forth?"

Ozias bent his head. "The words of my lord shall be obeyed. In an hour from now thy servant shall set out even to do thy bidding."

"So be it," replied Caleb, and turning with those that were with him he was soon lost among the tents, while

Ozias roused his servants from their slumbers, and sent them forth to pick three thousand of the men of Judah, who should march with him against Ai.

Hardly has the word passed that an enterprise was on foot, and that Ozias had been appointed to lead the detachment, than his tent was besieged by many, eager to be included in the chosen company. But leaving the selection to Sethur and Zithri, his chosen lieutenants, Ozias set his face toward the tent of Adriel, revolving in his mind how that such an employment as he could offer could not fail to be welcome to the spirit of the young soldier, and would exert a powerful influence toward shaking off the strange humor that had seized upon him.

As he hurried along, he was surprised to see the man he sought coming toward him.

"Adriel!" he exclaimed. "It is well I have met thee, for I was hastening to thy tent to bid thee go up with me against Ai. Peradventure a journey into the mountains will bring back the bloom to thy cheek and the fire to thine eye."

Adriel looked up as Ozias spoke, and the old soldier almost started back in surprise and grief at the change which three days had produced. That haggard, weary face even the news of action was powerless to lighten.

For a moment Adriel did not answer, but stood silent and abstracted as he pondered on what excuse he could offer to avoid the service, a service which might last several days, his absence during which could not fail to be fraught with the gravest danger to the maiden concealed among the ruins. At last, seeing that Ozias eyed him with surprise not unmingled with impatience, he said:

"Wouldst thou have a sick man with thee? Perchance thou mayest need the full strength of thy complement."

"Tush!" answered Ozias testily. "'Tis but the languor of the camp. Trust me, it is action and enterprise that will drive away the sombre spirits that oppress thy mind."

"Ozias," said Adriel, "thou knowest that I am not the man to shun either danger or toil, and now I say unto thee that ere I had journeyed with thee as far as the pass, my head would swim and my foot fail me. It is in vain thou urgest. I cannot go."

He spoke decidedly, and the keen old soldier saw that argument was useless to press his cause. He shrugged his shoulders and saying, "Be it as thou wilt, but I thought to do thee a service," turned back to where his detachment was fast gathering for the march.

"Strange, strange," he murmured. "It was his nature to bound with joy at such a service. Verily, he is possessed of a devil."

But the time for musing was short, for now three thousand and hardy warriors stood ready under arms—picked men all, and eager to be led up against the people whose country they now looked upon as, of a truth, their own. The trumpets blared out their brazen summons. Ozias took his place at the head of the detachment, and Joshua, standing on a little rising ground amid a group of the princes, stretched out his hands over them, and with a few brief words bade them go forth.

"See well, ye men of Israel, that ye smite them with the edge of the sword and leave not one man alive, even as ye smote the men of Jericho; and may the Lord our God attend ye and give ye victory over all your enemies!"

Again the trumpet sounded the long slow blast of advance, and the invading party moved forward amid the shouts of the surrounding multitude, who envied them the relief from the irksome tedium of a dull camp. Clearly the now arisen sun, with neither cloud nor mist to dim its effulgence, shone down upon their polished mail as the bearded ranks swept by, through the western gate of the rampart and off into the acacia-studded plain, until the waving spear tips were lost amid the thickening foliage of the distance.

CHAPTER XI.—UNDER THE SPELL.

Pass we by the day. Our business is not with it; nor need we follow that grim old soldier, Ozias, with his desert-hardened followers, as they wind up the tortuous pathways of the mountain thirsting for blood, confident of the slackening of their thirst, yet watchful and wary lest jutting cliff or dense ravine should give hiding to snare or ambushade. They are gone. They have been gone now for many hours, and the darkness is once again spread over tent and ruin.

Adriel had been resting, as was his wont, during the day, while his family and friends whispered sorrowfully among themselves that the fit was upon him. They say that their presence served but to irritate his troubled brain, and therefore they kept aloof. Even Abiathar was roughly told to take himself hence, and the ill-concealed anxiety of Miriam, which the boy incautiously revealed, seemed but to throw the patient into a fit gloomier even than those that had gone before.

Abiathar, while obedient to the wish of Adriel, he withdrew himself from the tent, yet mindful of his father's bidding, lingered around and kept a close watch that he whom they deemed a sick man should not go forth unattended.

At last the boy's watching bore fruit, for, as the night wore into the middle watch, he saw Adriel issue out, clad as before, in tunic and mantle, and take his way toward the western plain. Rising quickly from where he lay upon the grass, Abiathar followed at such a distance as to be unobserved. He ran small risk, for the thoughts of Adriel were far away from the fear of being spied upon. The events of the day had shown conclusively that the game he was playing could not be continued at any length of time. True, he had been saved much embarrassment by the mistake made as to the nature of his ailment—a mistake which he had been careful to do nothing to correct; yet even this had its evil in the close watch to which he was subjected.

(To be continued.)

THE Rev. Dr. Adam opened recently the beautiful new church at Coatbridge, erected for the congregation of which the late Professor Henderson, of Rome, was for many years pastor. It is seated for 600 and has cost \$9,000.