

Without minding them, he ran on, and put the sponge to the Nazarene's lips.

Too late, too late !

The face then plainly seen by Ben-Hur, bruised and black with blood and dust as it was, lighted nevertheless with a sudden glow ; the eyes opened wide, and fixed upon some one visible to them alone in the far heavens ; and there were content and relief, even triumph, in the shout the victim gave.

" It is finished ! It is finished ! "

So a hero, dying in the doing a great deed, celebrates his success with a last cheer.

The light in the eyes went out ; slowly the crowned head sank upon the labouring breast, Ben-Hur thought the struggle over ; but the fainting soul recollected itself, so that he and those around him caught the other and last words, spoken in a low voice, as if to one listening close by :

" Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit. "

A tremor shook the tortured body ; there was a cry of fiercest anguish, and the mission and the earthly life were over at once. The heart, with all its love, was broken ; for of that, O reader, the Saviour died.

Ben-Hur went back to his friends, saying simply, " It is over ; He is dead. "

In a space incredibly short the multitude was informed of the circumstance. No one repeated it aloud ; there was a murmur which spread from the knoll in every direction ; a murmur that was little more than a whispering, " He is dead ! He is dead ! " and that was all. The people had their wish ; the Nazarene was dead ; yet they stared at each other aghast. His blood was upon them ! And while they stood staring at each other, the ground commenced to shake ; each man took hold of his neighbour to support himself ; in a twinkling the darkness disappeared, and the sun came out ; and everybody, as with the same glance, beheld the crosses upon the hill all reeling drunken-like in the earthquake. They beheld all three of them ; but the one in the centre was arbitrary ; it alone would be seen ; and for that it seemed to extend itself upwards, and lift its burden, and swing it to and fro higher and higher in the blue of the sky. And every man among them who had jeered at the Nazarene ; everyone who had struck him ; every one who had voted to crucify Him ; every one who had marched in the procession from the city ; every one who had in his heart wished Him dead, and they were as ten to one, felt that he was in some way individually singled out from the many, and that if he would live he must get away quickly as possible from that menace in the sky. They started to run ; they ran with all their might ; on horseback, on camels, and in chariots they ran, as well as on foot ; but then, as if it were enraged at them for what they had done, and had taken up the cause of the unoffending and friendless dead, the earthquake pursued them and