

Choice Literature.

A KING OF TYRE.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NHEMIAH.

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CHAPTER I.

The island city of Tyre lay close to the Syrian coast. It seemed to float among the waves that fretted themselves into foam as they rolled in between the jagged rocks, and spread over the flats, retiring again to rest in the deep bosom of the Mediterranean. The wall that encircled the island rose in places a hundred cubits, and seemed from a distance to be an enormous monolith. It was therefore called *Esur*, or Tyre, which means The Rock. At the time of our narrative, about the middle of the fifth century, B.C., the sea-girt city contained a dense mass of inhabitants, who lived in tall wooden houses of many storeys; for the ground space within the walls could not lodge the multitude who pursued the various arts and commerce for which the Tyrians were, of all the world, the most noted. The streets were narrow, often entirely closed to the sky by projecting balconies and arcades mere veins and arteries for the circulation of the city's throbbing life.

For recreation from their dying vats, looms and foundries the artisan people climbed to the broad spaces on the top of the walls, where they could breathe the sweet sea air, except when the easterly wind was hot and gritty with dust from the mainland, a few bow shots distant. The men of commerce thronged the quay of the Sidonian harbour at the north end of the island, or that of the Egyptian harbour on the south side—two artificial basins which were at all times crowded with ships; for the Tyrian merchantmen scoured all the coast of the Great Sea, even venturing through the straits of Gades, and northward to the coasts of Britain and southward along the African shore; giving in barter for the crude commodities they found not only the products of their own workshops, but the freight of their caravans that climbed the Lebanon and wearily tracked across the deserts to Arabia and Babylon. The people of fashion paraded their pride on the Great Square, in the heart of the city, called by the Greeks the Eurychorus, where they displayed their rich garments in competition with the flowers that grew, almost as artificially, in gay parterres amid the marble blocks of the pavement.

But one day a single topic absorbed the conversation of all classes alike, in the Great Square, on the walls, and along the quays. Councillors of state and moneyed merchants debated it with bowed heads and wrinkled brows. Moulders talked of it as they cooled themselves at the doorways of their foundries. Weavers, in the excitement of their wrangling over it, forgot to throw the shuttle. Seamen, lounging on the heaps of cordage, gave the subject all the light they could strike from oaths in the names of all the gods of all the lands they had ever sailed to. Even the women, as they stood in the open doorways, piloting their words between the cries of the children who bestrode their shoulders or clung to their feet, pronounced their judgment upon—all absorbing topic.

A bulletin had appeared on the great square proclaiming, in the name of the High Council of Tyre, a stupendous religious celebration. Vast sums of money had been appropriated from the city treasury, and more was demanded from the people. A multitude of animals was to be sacrificed, and even the blood of human victims should enrich the altar, that thus might be purchased the favour of Almighty Baal.

To understand this proclamation we must know the circumstances that led to it.

The Phœnician prestige among the nations had for many years been steadily waning. The political dominance of Persia, with her capital far over the deserts at Susa, was less humiliating to this proud people than was the growing commercial importance of the Greeks across the sea. For not only had the Greeks whipped the Phœnicians in naval battles, as at Salamis and Eurymedon, but they were displacing Phœnician wares in foreign markets, and teaching the Greek language, customs and religion to all the world. Yet the Greeks were thought by the Tyrians to be but an upstart people. They had not so many generations, as the Phœnicians had ages, of glorious history.

How could Phœnicia regain the supremacy? This was the all absorbing question which appealed to the patriotism, and still more to the purses, of the Tyrians, and of their neighbours along the coast.

Many were the wisacres who readily solved this problem to their own satisfaction. Thus, for example, the priests of Melkarth—the name they gave to Baal in his special office as guardian of the city—had a theory of their own. It was to the effect that the gods were offended at the growing laxity of worship, and especially at the falling-off of the temple revenues, which were in great measure the sumptuous perquisites of the priests themselves. They were especially disaffected towards their young king, Hiram, whom they regarded as an obstacle to any reforms on this line. Hiram had spent his early training years with the fleet, and was conversant with the faith and customs of many countries. Thus he was educated to a cosmopolitan, not to say sceptical, habit of mind, and was led to doubt whether any movement that originated in the ambition of a horde of unscrupulous and superstitious priests could win the favour of the gods, even admitting that such supernatural beings existed, of which the king was reported to have expressed a doubt.

King Hiram had been but a few months on the throne, to which he had succeeded on the death of his father, when he opened the meeting of the Great Council which issued the proclamation regarding the sacrifice.

His Majesty sat upon the bronze throne. Above him shone a canopy of beaten gold. At his back hung a curtain of richest Tyrian purple, in the centre of which gleamed a silver dove with outspread wings, the symbol of Tyre from those ancient days when its commerce and renown began to fly abroad over the world.

Hiram's face was typically Phœnician, and betokened the clear tide of his racial blood. His forehead was broad, and

prominent at the brows. His eyes were gleaming black. His nose started as if with the purpose of being Jewish, but terminated in the expanded nostril that suggested the Egyptian. His hair was black, with the slightest touch of red, which, however, only strong light would reveal. He wore the conical cap of the sailor, for his pride of naval command had never become secondary to even his sense of royal dignity, and many a time had he declared that a true Phœnician king was chiefly king of the sea. The royal cap was distinguished from that of common sailors by the uræus, or winged serpent's crest, which was wrought in golden needlework upon the front. The king's throat and chest were bare, except for a purple mantle which hung from his left shoulder, and crossed his body diagonally; and for a broad collar of silk embroidered with silver threads, which shone in contrast with his weather-bronzed skin. His arms were clasped above the elbows with heavy spirals of gold. He wore a loose white chiton, or undergarment, which terminated above the knees, and revealed as knotty a pair of legs as ever balanced so graceful a figure. But one thing marred his appearance—a deep scar on his chin, the memorial of a hand to hand fight with Egyptian pirates off the mouth of the Nile.

The king leaned upon one of the lion heads that made the arms of his throne. One foot rested upon a footstool of bronze; the other in the spotted fur of a leopard, spread upon the dais.

Sitting thus, he spoke of the subject before the Council. At first he scarcely changed his easy attitude. He traced the rise of the Greek power with voluble accuracy, for he had studied the problems it presented in another school than that of Phœnician prejudices. As he proceeded he warmed with the kindling of his own thoughts, and, straightening himself on the throne, gesticulated forcibly, making the huge arm of the chair tremble under the stroke of his fist, as if the moulded bronze were the obdurate heads of his listeners. At length, fully heated with the excitement of his speech, and by the antagonism too plainly revealed in the faces of some of his courtiers, he rose from his throne, and stood upon the leopard skin as he concluded with these words:

"Let me speak plainly, O leaders of Phœnicia, as a king of men should speak to kingly men! Why does the Greek outstrip us? Because he is stronger. Why is he stronger? Because he is wiser. Why is he wiser? Because he learns from all the world; and we, though we trade with all the tribes of men, learn from none. Our guide marks are our own footprints, which we follow in endless circles. We boast, O Phœnicians, that we have taught the world its alphabet, but we ourselves have no books beyond the tablets on which we keep the accounts of our ships, our caravans and our shambles. It is our shame, O men of Tyre! We have instructed the sailors of the Great Sea to guide their ships by the stars, but in all our customs of government and religion we dare not leave the coast line of our ancient notions. We go up and down the channels of our prejudices, ay, we ground ourselves in our ignorance."

"And hear, O ye priests! Our religion as practised is our disgrace. If Baal be the intelligence that shines in the sun, he despises us for our stupidity. Nay, scowl if ye will! But look at the statues of our gods! A Greek boy could carve as finely with the dough he eats. Look at our temples! The Great Hiram built a finer one than we possess five centuries ago, there in Jerusalem, for the miserable Jews to worship their Jehovah in. Ye say that Baal is angry with us. And well he may be! For we open not our minds to the brightness of his beams, we hide in the shadows of things that are old and decayed, even as the lizards crawl in the shadow of the ruins that everywhere mark our plains."

"Ye say, O priests, that we must sacrifice more to Baal. Truly! But it is not the sacrifice of death, rather the real offering of life, of our wiser thoughts, our braver enterprise, that Baal would have."

"This, this is the end of all my speaking, O men of Tyre! Heap up your treasures, and burn them if ye will! Slaughter your beasts! Toss your babes into the fire of Moloch! But know ye that your king gives you no such commandment; nor will he have more of such counsel."

So saying, King Hiram strode down from the dais, and left the council chamber. As he passed out, the members rose and made deep obeisance; but their bowed forms did not conceal from him their scowling faces.

The councillors, left alone, gathered close together, evidently not for debate, but to confirm one another in some predetermined purpose. Their words were bitter. Old Egbalus, the high priest of Baal-Melkarth for the year, thanked his god that the throne of Tyre had lost its power, since one so utterly blasphemous, so traitorous, had come to occupy it.

"That travelling Greek, Herodotus, who is even now his guest, has bewitched the king with his talk," sneered one.

"Or with his Greek gold," timidly ventured another.

The last speaker was a young man, in princely attire, with marked resemblance to King Hiram; but such resemblance as is often noticed between an ugly and a beautiful face; certain features attesting kinship, while, at the same time, they proclaim the utmost difference of character. This person was Prince Rubaal, cousin to Hiram, and, in the event of the death of the latter without issue, the heir to the crown. His naturally selfish disposition had brewed nothing but gall since Hiram's accession. From polite disparagement he lapsed into the habit of open contempt for the person, and bitter antagonism to the interests of his royal relative. That the king was hostile to the pretensions of the priestly guild was sufficient to make Rubaal their slavish adherent.

The sneer with which he attributed a mercenary motive to the king brought him a look of blandest encouragement from the high priest, Egbalus.

This latter dignity, however, instantly cast a less complacent and more inquisitive glance into the face of another councillor, Ahimelek. How much was meant by that look can be understood only by recalling the character and career of this man.

Ahimelek was small in stature, of low, broad brow, thin lips, restless grey eyes, which seemed to focus upon nothing, as if afraid of revealing the thought back of them; as a partridge, when disturbed, flits in all directions except over its own nest. He was the richest merchant in Tyre, the largest ship owner in all Phœnicia. His fleets were passing, like shuttles on the loom of his prosperity, between Tyre and Cyprus, Carthage and Gades. His caravans, too, were well known on every route from Damascus to Memphis. He inherited the wealth of several generations of merchants, and also their ancestral shrewdness. His waking dream was

to surpass them all by allying his financial power with the political prestige of the royal house of Tyre. To this end he had spared neither money nor sycophancy in order to gain the favour of the late king.

It was therefore with genuine elation that the merchant had noticed the growing intimacy between Hiram and his daughter, the fair Zillah.

From childhood Prince Hiram and Zillah had been much together, the old king having been, in the chronic depletion of his treasury, as little averse to a family alliance with the money bags of Ahimelek as that aristocrat was to guarding his bags with the royal seal. Indeed, on more than one occasion the king had discovered an authority in Ahimelek's darts that was lacking in his own mandates. It was rumoured that the recognition of Hiram's sovereignty by the court at Susa had been deferred until the appointment of Ahimelek as his chamberlain gave promise of substantial benefit to the politicians who surrounded the Great King, Artaxerxes.

It is true, however, that the personal attractions of Zillah, without such reasons of State, had captivated young Prince Hiram. She was the goddess who inspired his dreams during his voyages, and into her ear, on his return, he narrated his adventures, and confessed his most secret projects and ambitious hopes. On the very day of his coronation, a year before our story begins, he left the great hall of ceremony, not to return to his palace, but to visit the mansion of Ahimelek, and then and there placed his crown upon the head of Zillah, claiming her oft repeated promise to be his queen. That very night, too, the delighted merchant had given the hand of his daughter into that of her royal suitor, accepting from him a splendid gift as the marriage purchase, and presenting to him in return the dowry contract, which in this case was the bonding of his estate to pay in cash a thousand minas of gold and half the revenues of his trade in perpetuity.

But later events had disturbed the equanimity of Ahimelek. The growing dissatisfaction of the priestly guild towards King Hiram was too ominous to be disregarded. Their power over the people had never been challenged with impunity. Could the king maintain himself against them?

One act of Zillah herself had seemed to endanger her royal prospects. It was a sacred custom for the wife of a Phœnician king to become also a priestess of the goddess Astarte, thus consolidating the sacerdotal and royal authorities. Into this sacred office Zillah had refused to enter, in which determination she was doubtless influenced by the prejudices of her royal lover.

To Ahimelek's fears, therefore, the crown of Tyre seemed suspended by a slender thread over an abyss from which he could not rescue it if it should fall. He therefore had, on various pretexts, postponed the marriage. But his scheming mind discerned a refuge for his ambition in the fact that Rubaal was a jealous rival for the heart of Zillah. Indeed, much of that young man's hostility to his cousin was due to his wounded affections. It therefore seemed clear to Ahimelek that, in the event of the overthrow of King Hiram, there would be an equal opportunity for his own aggrandisement in transferring his daughter's hand to that of the new king. Such were the thoughts that disturbed Ahimelek as he sat at the council table.

The high priest, Egbalus, had already fathomed the perplexity of the merchant's mind when he gave him that questioning glance.

Ahimelek's eyes fluttered more than ever as they met the inquisitorial gaze of the priest. What would he not give to know the future? On which side should he cast his vote?

Egbalus was too subtle a politician to press the query to a definite answer in the council hall. He knew his man, and knew that if Ahimelek did not dare to go with the priests, neither would he dare to oppose them.

Other members of the council were more readily subversive. Indeed, the predominating influence of Egbalus in public affairs had already made itself felt in the selection of the persons who were nominally the king's advisers. He knew, indeed he owned, them all.

The decree ordaining the splendid sacrifice was therefore issued. The proclamation was quickly posted on the temple gate, the door of the council chamber, and in the Great Square.

Would the king oppose it? If so, it would bring on the conflict the priests desired, and had long been preparing for.

CHAPTER II.

When King Hiram left the council hall, pages swung aside the heavy curtains which screened the doorways; lackeys bore before him, so far as the exit, the ancient sceptre of Tyre, laid upon a gemmed cushion, palanquin bearers took their places around the royal vehicle; while the outrunners, with trim legs and short, fluted white skirts, balanced in their hands the long rods of their office, and ran to clear the way. The chief attendant was distinguished from the others by his crimson skirt, which hung from a silver belt tightening his loins, and by the long ribbons of purple that, encircling his brow, hung as streamers almost to the ground. With that superb grace which only accomplished athletes require, he bowed to the earth as the king descended the marble steps leading from the hall.

"Whither, O king?"

"The hour?" enquired Hiram.

"It begins the seventh, by the grace of Baal!" replied the attendant.

"To the Sidonian Harbour, then."

The runners flew. The crowds in the narrow streets backed close against the houses on either side.

"Long live King Hiram!" murmured from hundreds of lips, but the king noted that it was shouted by none. If there were loyalty it was without enthusiasm. The priests scowled, or, pretending to be preoccupied with pious meditation, allowed the royal palanquin to pass without salute.

Reaching the quay, the king stepped quickly from his carriage, and, returning with equal courtesy the low salam of an elderly man, embraced him cordially. Even if this person's garb had not revealed his nationality, his straight nose on a line with his forehead would have proclaimed him a Greek. His face was weather-beaten and bronzed by exposure to many climes. His firm lips and strong chin would have suggested to an observer that he was a man of resoluteness, perhaps one engaged in daring adventures; were it not that a certain quiet depth in his eyes, a passive in-