

## Choice Literature.

## A KING OF TYRE.

## A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

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## CHAPTER X.

Thus the sacred regatta moved over the prescribed course to the mainland. Leaving the barges, the priests were marshalled into a vast procession. At the head moved the trumpeters, their instruments pitched to a wailing key, and giving forth long and monotonous notes. They were followed by others, carrying the various articles that were to be offered. Then came the living sacrifices. About the parents who were bringing their children to the god, the singing priests formed a circle, and drowned the weeping in the louder praise they shouted to Baal. The throne of the king was placed upon an open platform, and, with its royal occupant, was borne upon the shoulders of the most noted of the hierarchy; the neophyte Hanno being honoured with a place by its side, and with a wand of authority as one of the directors of the ceremony.

During the passage from the landing-place to the presence of the idol, the people were allowed to look upon their vicarious sacrifice. All hatred and wrath had given way to the better emotions of reverence, gratitude, and affection. The crowd pressed as close to the line as the priestly attendants would permit, and there threw themselves upon the ground, kissing the spot their king's form had shadowed, and gathering up handfuls of the dust for sacred memorial. He was now their possession as they had never thought when they called him their king; for he was their substitute, upon whom were laid all their woes and fears; and soon he was to be their god, when, through the mystery of the fire-offering, he would pass into the sublimer mysteries of the glory of Baal.

A little way to the front of the idol had been erected a silken pavilion, covered with devices and mottoes of religious import, which were elaborately wrought with needle-work upon its floating walls of crimson. This was the Holy Place, into which the great atoner, leaving his throne, retired from the gaze of all, that in secrecy he might prepare himself for the final offering; that, as Egbalus had said, his soul might first pass into, and be absorbed by, the very being of deity, before his body should be given to the outward image of the Unknown. The high priest had declared that so thorough was the acquiescence of the king in his own immolation that, when he should come forth from the sacred pavilion and proceed to the flames, he would not be a mortal, but only the semblance of his former self; his glory shielded as a cloud shields the sun, lest the sight should blind the beholders.

As the curtains fell, secluding Hiram in the sacred pavilion, Egbalus kissed the spot where the victim's foot last touched the outer earth. Together with the attendant priests, he then retired from the proximity of the tent, leaving a broad space about it unoccupied by a human being, but penetrated by the gaze of thousands.

A long silence fell upon the multitude. A strange, oppressive awe of what might be transpiring within stifled the very breathing of the waiting throngs.

Then, suddenly, the blare of a hundred trumpets gave the signal for the presentation of the offerings. The inanimate gifts were first placed in huge piles upon the arms of the god, which, being lowered, dropped them into the flames beneath. Next, the living animals of small size were laid bound in his hands. The horse and bull were first slain, their blood poured over the arms of the idol, their hearts thrust into his open jaw, until, shrunken by the heat, they fell into the pit, and were consumed with the remaining flesh.

Then followed a stillness as of Sheol itself, broken only by the sobbing of the women who approached the image, each bearing her child in her arms. One, overcome by her contending emotions, fell fainting, but a priest instantly seized the child, and laid it upon the hot hands that shook it into the flames. Some staggered on with closed eyes, guided and goaded by the attendants. Some sang, in half crazy ecstasy, the wild refrain of temple hymns, swaying their babes in time with the rhythm, and, without assistance, ascended the steps and presented their sacrifice. As babe after babe disappeared through the smoke, new waves of excitement poured over the crowd, hot waves of delirium, burning out humane instincts, and firing that rage of beasts which is latent in all men. The crowd yelled in frenzy. The priests, with their long knives, gashed their bodies, and, filling their mouths with their own flowing blood, spit it forth again in the direction of the god.

Then, as the last babe was offered, the grand expectation brought the multitude to silence. Egbalus approached the holy pavilion. He raised his hand. The note of a single trumpet, finer, sweeter, yet sadder than any other, floated over the throng. It was repeated, with louder sound and more prolonged. Again it rang forth with full blast, and was answered by one borne over the water from the Temple of Melkarth in the island city. Then the high priest stood with uplifted hands. It seemed many minutes to the people, whose excitement was scarcely endurable. Turning to where the folding curtain indicated the entrance to the pavilion, Egbalus cried with loud voice:—

"Come forth, O thou accepted of Baal!"

He instantly prostrated himself on the ground. The priests in the front row of spectators fell prone upon their faces. In the crowd every neck was stretched and all eyes strained to catch the first glimpse of the sacrificial hero.

But the curtain of the pavilion did not move. Was not the victim's prayer yet completed? Was he so absorbed in communion with his god that he had become oblivious to what was outward? Or did he flinch now at the fatal instant? Perhaps the god had become his own priest and stricken him, or sweetly drawn his consecrated spirit from his body? Was he already dead?

Egbalus rose slowly from the ground, keeping his eyes upon the curtain to note its first flutter. Again he struck his most august attitude, and repeated the invocation:—

"Come forth, thou accepted of Baal!"

He prostrated himself as before. But still there was no response.

The high priest rose again. He advanced, and touched the curtain, but, evidently overcome by a feeling that it were sacrilege, or perhaps by the dread of some mystery beyond his solution, or some ghostly power raised by his word, but not amenable to it, and that would not down at his bidding, he withdrew. He beckoned the dignitaries next in rank to himself, among them Hanno, and with them held a consultation. They were evidently as puzzled as he.

A third time the solemn invocation was pronounced, but with the same futile result. Egbalus then, with pretence of bold exercise of his office, but with manifest trepidation, laid his hand upon the curtain. Hesitatingly he drew it aside. For a moment he stared into the shadows. He advanced a step, then suddenly retreated. He looked about him as one bewildered and uncertain how to act. He motioned to the nearest priests. They came reverently, answering the perplexed face of the high priest with looks of equal curiosity and alarm. One by one they looked into the pavilion. Then they raised their hands as if Heaven alone could account for what they saw.

*The Holy Place was empty!*

"The god! the god has taken him!" said Egbalus, in half-dubious, half-credulous voice.

"The god has taken him!" shouted Hanno, and ran towards the crowd, wildly throwing his arms. "Let us die with him!"

He grasped for his priest's knife. It had fallen from his belt. He beat his breast, and fell in convulsions to the earth. Some of the people fainted with fright. Others covered their heads with their mantles, as if to shut out some stupendous apparition.

At this terrible moment a new portent occurred. The colossal image of Baal shook. Its metal folds creaked one upon another. The ground trembled as if from the convulsion of some subterranean spirit. The idol tottered, and fell half-way to the earth. The priests, wild with terror, ran shrieking into the crowd. Panic seized the multitude, who trod upon one another in their haste to get away from the dread proximity. Many were maimed as they fell among the great stones of the old ruin that covered the ground, and some were crushed beneath the trampling feet, or smothered under the accumulated mass of helpless humanity piled above them. Only when they had reached a distance did the fleeing men pause to look back. Egbalus alone remained near the pavilion. He seemed to have been transformed into a statue. At length he moved, not to follow the awe-stricken fugitives, but to enter the pavilion! Such halting steps did he take that one might have imagined him drawn by some invisible power which he was trying to resist.

"The god has taken the high priest also!" cried Hanno, who had recovered sufficient self-possession to raise his head and look; but, horror-stricken by the sight, he buried his face in the dust.

A venerable priest advanced from the cowering throng midway the open space, and raised his knife with a loud cry: "I too, would come to thee, O Baal!"

He plunged the gleaming blade into his own heart. Scores of knives flashed in the hands of the demented priests about him, as if they, also, were waiting the audible summons to follow.

Suddenly Egbalus reappeared. He beckoned those nearest. He called for Hanno, but the new enthusiasm had proved too much for the neophyte, untrained to such deep emotions, and he lay a heaving heap of unconscious devotion. Egbalus selected two attendants, and with them re-entered the Holy Place. Would the god have more? No, Baal was satisfied; for, see! the three priests emerge, not one of them blasted to a walking cinder, nor ascending in a flame of fire. They talked excitedly. Egbalus lifted his hand.

Suddenly the long blare of a trumpet announced the termination of the sacrifice. The crowds were not allowed to re-enter the enclosure, but betook themselves, some to Tyre or to their ships, some over the hills to the inland villages, others along the coast—on foot, in litters, on mules and camels and stately steeds—all scattering, to astound the world with their reports of the miracle.

The setting sun flashed its red rays upon the leaning figure of Baal, that seemed to bow in obeisance to the god of day. Only the priests remained to watch until Astarte, smiling in the crescent moon, wrote her benediction with the silvery beams she threw over the scene.

## CHAPTER XI.

Had King Hiram vanished into the mystery of Baal? No. He had vanished under a mystery of Hanno.

When Hiram entered the sacred pavilion the place was exceedingly dark by reason of the heavy curtains that enclosed it, and the glare of the outer light that he had just left, for the instant, prevented his eyes from adapting themselves to their new environment. By degrees his power of vision was regained. He observed that the tapestried walls were wrought with the various symbols of worship; the sun of Baal, the moon of Astarte, the fish of Dagon, the star of Adonis, and the like. Beneath his feet lay a rug of silken shreds, pure white. He threw himself down upon this to collect his thoughts; to gather up his strength for the final act in this terrible tragedy. Surely Hanno's hopeful words had been merely to cheer him; they meant nothing, or his friend's plans for his rescue had miscarried. There was now no escape.

He prayed; to whom? He knew not; but still he prayed. For what? Not for himself; it was too late for that. He prayed for Hanno; that, in the desperation of his love, he might not attempt to make good his pledge of dying with his king; that he might be restrained from making a useless assault upon the priests, or from throwing himself into the flames. Then he prayed for her who was more to him than life—for Zillah. He gathered up his whole soul in a loving thought of her, and laid it—where? Upon the highest altar in the highest heavens, if there were any such place where pity for mortals existed. Then, as the sweet face of his beloved one filled his imagination, a tear fell—the first during all these days of agony; for the bodily humours seemed to have been dried by the hot fury of his grief. The tear fell upon his hand. He bowed to kiss it, because it fell for her. As he did so, his eye caught a spot of gleaming red in the white rug. Mechanically, without definite purpose in

doing so, he traced the red line as it ran through the silken nap. It took shape. A wing!—and a circle! It was only a half-conscious thought—"The Winged Circle," such as was used as a religious device by the Persians, and was also carved on the stone architraves of some temples of Astarte. Then the full thought flashed upon him, "The mark of the circle!" Hanno's sign! Was it designed?

He raised the rug. A similar mark was rudely scratched upon a broad stone that lay just beneath it. He felt the edge of the stone. It moved. A tilting stone! He lifted it a little. A cool and dank air rushed out. This, surely, was a door into some passage! By a little exertion he was able to swing the stone upon its edge. Adjusting the rug over it in such a way that it would again cover the stone when restored to its horizontal position, he let himself carefully down through the opening. So strong was the draught of air that he scarcely needed to feel his way by touching the wall on either side, but guided himself very much as he had sometimes done when, on a dark night at sea, he helmed his ship by feeling the wind against his cheek.

He thought of this just for an instant, but it was long enough to think of Hanno too, as, in their last sail, they had steered the craft together. He could not restrain a subdued cry of gratitude.

"Noble fellow! Thy hand is on the other oar, as thou didst pledge. Thou art the only god that is left to me!"

For a little way he crawled over and around the débris that obstructed the labyrinth. Then he felt the space enlarging. A smooth pavement was beneath him. With extended hands he hurried forward. He heard the roar of fire and knew that he was passing near to the pit beneath the image of Baal. A hot gleam shot through a crevice. It revealed a door of bronze covering an old entrance into the pit, through which anciently the priests had been accustomed to feed the flames. The door moved as he touched its hot surface. He opened it a little, that the light might illumine the passage. In the glare he saw several stout pieces of timber standing upright. These had been recently put in to brace the great idol, the foundation of which had given way on that side. Hiram took this in a glance—he had time only for a glance, for the flames burst forth upon him and drove him away before he could close the door. The fire caught the timbers, and, a little later, consuming them, toppled the image above. But of this he knew nothing, as taking advantage of the light, he plunged on through several hundred cubits of open way.

The passage he had followed ended in a small chamber into which struggled a ray of daylight. Here lay a coarse skull-cap of leather and a ragged chiton—a mere bag with holes at the bottom for the head and arms, the only garment worn by the poorest herdsmen. By the side of it was a club of heavy wood, knobbed with great spikes at one end—the ordinary weapon with which the herdsman defended himself and his flocks from prowling beasts. A little wallet contained dried dates and thin cakes of black bread; another was filled with small coins.

To divest himself of his princely clothing, don the chiton and tie the bags about his waist beneath it, was the task of a moment. Then on he went, working his way like a mole between the great stones that, in confused ruin, would have blocked his progress, had he not been guided by his faith in the prevision of his friend Hanno.

Gradually the air became purer. It revived his strength and courage. Light came in through an opening which was screened heavily by a clump of bushes beyond it. These guarded the northern end of the passage from the inspection of any one without. Crawling through a crevice in the rock, he emerged cautiously, concealing himself amid the dense foliage. The bushes grew in a little cleared space about which were piles of stone, which had anciently walled a portion of the temple. He crawled like a lizard to the top of the stones and raised his head. He was far beyond the crowd, whose faces were all turned in the opposite direction, watching with absorbed attention for his reappearance from the sacred pavilion. Over the stillness he heard distinctly the shrill voice of Egbalus, as it cried, "Come forth, thou accepted of Baal!" His impulse for flight was checked by tragic curiosity. The contagion of the general excitement caught him and held him almost spellbound. Danger always had for him a fascination; at this moment he felt it reinforced by a sudden passion for revenge. Why not join the crowd, work his way through it, dash into the cleared space, smite the high priest to the earth, and hurl his hated carcass into the flames! What if the priests then cut him into ten thousand pieces? It would be worth dying for. Why not be a Theseus to his people, and slay the Minotaur in the person of its most devilish representative? His brain reeled with the thought.

A wild cry of the multitude recalled him to his more cautious judgment. The people surged back. The great image toppled. Ah! how grimly he guessed the reason!

The crowd turned in his direction. Was it in flight? or had he been pointed out, and were they cutting off his escape? He gripped his club to brain the first who should climb the stone heap behind which he had taken refuge. As some came near he noted their terror-stricken faces, and knew that they were not seeking him in this direction, but fleeing from him yonder where he was a superstitious embodiment of their fears. Then a fiendish humour came upon him. He took the dirty cup from his head, and, bowing towards the distant figure of Egbalus, said:—

"I obey, O priest of Baal! Lo, I have come forth!"

He climbed down the farther side of the pile of ruins; paused a moment to rub handfuls of dirt over his hair and face, his clean-skinned legs and feet; then swinging his herdsman's club, he ran away, outstripping the most cowardly fugitive from the dread scene.

He looked for no new mark of the circle, for the country was well known to him. Often had he dashed over these fields on his horse after the fox. Here as a boy, he had practised the sling at the running jackalls. Yonder lay the road to Sidon, over which, in princely company, he had gone to discharge some duty of state, or more frequently to join in aristocratic revelry with the young nabobs who lived in favour of Prince Esmanazar. This road he dare not take.

To the east rose the mountains that walled so narrowly the plain to the sea. In them were hiding-places, but they would be speedily searched.

Beyond the first range, between the Lebanons, a broad valley was opened to the north, but that was a highway of traffic. The caravans were passing up and down it. He