

BEN HUR; OR, THE DAYS OF THE MESSIAH.

BOOK SEVENTH.

CHAPTER IV. (Continued.)

"Your speech does not sound in the least like your father's. Are you not of his flesh?"

"I might have been"—and she laughed low—"I might have been had I seen what he has. I may be when I get old like him. My father's God is too awful for me. I failed to find him in the Grove of Daphna. He was never heard of as present in the str of Rome. But, son of Hur, I have a wish."

"A wish! Where is he who could say it no I will try you."

"Tell it them."

"It is very simple. I wish to help you."

She drew closer as she spoke. He laughed, and replied lightly, "O Egypt!—I came near saying dear Egypt! does not the sphinx abide in your country?"

"Well?"

"You are one of its riddles. Be merciful, and give me a little clue to help me understand you. In what do I need help? And how can you help me?"

She took her hand from him, and, turning to the camel, spoke to it endearing, and patted its monstrous head as if it were a thing of beauty.

"O thou last and swiftest and stallet of the herds of Job! Sometimes thou, too, go stumbling, because the way is rough and stony and the burden grievous. How is it thou knowest the kind intent by a word, and always makest answer gratefully, though the help offered is from a woman? I will kiss thee, thou royal brute!"—she stooped, and touched its broad forehead with her lips, saying immediately, "because in thy intelligence there is no suspicion."

And Ben-Hur, restraining himself, said calmly, "The reproach has not failed its mark, O Egypt! I seem to say thee no; may it not be because I am under seal of honor, and by my silence cover the lives and fortunes of others?"

"May be!" she said quickly. "It is so."

He shrunk a step, and asked, his voice sharp with amazement, "What knowest thou?"

She answered, after a laugh. "Why do men deny that the senses of women are sharper than their eyes? Your face has been under my eyes all day. I had but to look at it to see you bore some weight in mind; and to find the weight, what had to do more than recall your debates with my father's Son of Hur?"—she lowered her voice with singular dexterity, "son of Hur! I am not of that name, but I am to be King of the Jews, is He not?"

His heart beat fast and hard. "A King of the Jews like Herod, only greater," she continued.

He looked away—into the night, up to the stars; then his eyes fell on her. "I have heard thee; but I know how much she knew of his schemes."

"Since morning," she said further, "we have been having visions. Now if I tell you mine, will you serve me as well? What I tell you?"

She turned away, as if to go; but he caught her, and said eagerly, "Stay—stay and speak!"

She went back, and with her hand upon his shoulder, leaned against him; and he put his arm around her. Silently he had given her the promise she asked.

"Speak, and tell me thy visions, O Egypt! dear Egypt! A prophet—may not that be? The Thibite, not even the Lawgiver—could have refused an asking of mine. I am at thy will. Be merciful—merciful, I pray."

The entreaty passed apparently unnoticed. Looking up, she said slowly, "I have seen a man, and he was of a magnificent war—on land and sea—with flashing of arms and rush of armies, as if Caesar and Pompey were come again, and Octavius and Antony. A cloud of dust and ashes arose and covered the world, and Rome was not any more; all dominion returned to the King of the East, and there were vaster armies and brighter crowns for giving away than were ever known. And, son of Hur, while the vision was passing, and after it was gone, I kept asking myself, 'What shall he not have who served the King of the East and best?'"

Again Ben-Hur recoiled. The question was the very question which had been with him all day. Presently he fancied he had the clue he wanted.

"So," he said, "I have you now. The astral and crowns are the things to which you would help me. And there never was a man as queen as you would be, so shrewd, so beautiful, so royal—never! But, alas! dear Egypt! by the vision as you show it me the prizes are all of war, and you are but a woman, though Iria did kiss you on the heart. And crowns are starry gifts beyond your power of help, indeed, you have a way to them more certain than that of the sword. If so, O Egypt, Egypt! show it me, and I will walk in it, if only for your sake."

"You will find the King," she said, placing her hand caressingly upon his head. "You will go on and find the King and serve him. With your sword you will earn His richest gifts, and His best soldier will be my hero."

He turned his face, and saw her close above. In all the sky there was that moment nothing so bright to him as her eyes, embathed through their tears. Presently he sat up and kissed her, saying, "O Egypt, Egypt! If the King has crowns in gift, you shall be mine; and I will bring it and put it here over the place my lips have marked. You shall be a queen—my queen—no one more beautiful! And we will be ever, ever so happy together."

"And you will tell me everything, and let me have you in all?" she said.

The question chilled his fervour.

"It is not enough that I love you?" he asked.

"Perfect love means perfect faith," she replied. "But never mind—you will know me better."

She took her hand from him and arose. "You are cruel," he said.

Moving away, she stopped by the camel, and touched its front face with her lips.

"O thou most of thy kind!—thou, because there is no suspicion in thy love." An instant, and she was gone.

CHAPTER V.

THE HERALD AND HIS KING.

The third day of the journey the party halted by the river Jabok, where there were a hundred or more men, mostly of Persia, resting themselves and their beasts. Hardly had they dismounted, before a man came to them with a pitcher of water and a bowl, and offered them drink; as they received the attention with much courtesy, he said, looking at the camel, "I am returning from the Jordan, where just now there are many people from distant parts, travelling as you are, illustrious friends; but they had none of them the equal of your servant here. A very noble animal. May I ask of what breed he is sprung?"

Balthasar answered, and sought his rest; but Ben-Hur, more curious, took up the remark.

"At what place on the river are the people?" he asked.

"At Bethabara."

"It used to be a lone some ford," said Ben-Hur. "I cannot understand how it can have become of such interest."

"I see," the stranger replied; "you, too, are from abroad, and have not heard the good tidings."

"What tidings?"

"Balthasar has appeared out of the wilderness—a very holy man—with his mouth full of strange words, which take hold of all who hear them. He calls himself John the son of Zacharias, and says he is the messenger sent before the Messiah."

Even Ira listened closely while the man continued.

"They say of this John that he has spent his life from childhood in a cave down by Engedi, praying and living more strictly than the Essenes. Crowds go to hear him preach. I went to hear him with the rest."

"Have all these, your friends, been there?"

"Most of them are going; a few are coming away."

"What does he preach?"

"A new doctrine—one never before taught in Israel, as all say. He calls it repentance and baptism. The rabbi do not think it worth the trouble of him; nor do we. Some have asked him if he is the Christ, others if he is Elias; but to them all he has the answer, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

At this point the man was called away by his friends; as he was going Balthasar spoke.

"Good stranger!" he said tremulously, "tell us if we shall find the preacher at the place you left him?"

"Yes, at Bethabara."

"Who should this preacher be?" said Ben-Hur to Ira, "if not the herald of our King?"

In so short a time he had come to regard the daughter as more interested in the mysterious personage he was looking for than the aged father! Nevertheless the latter, with a positive glow in his sunken eyes, half smiled, and said:

"Let us turn away, I am not tired."

They turned away to help the slave. There was little conversation between the three at the stopping place for the night west of Ramoth-Gilead.

"Let us arise early, son of Hur," said the old man. "The Saviour may come, and we not there."

"The King cannot be far behind His herald," Ira whispered as she prepared to take her place on the camel.

"To-morrow we will see!" Ben-Hur replied, kissing her hand.

Next day about the third hour, out of the desert, and a multitude collected down close by the bank, and yet another multitude on the western shore. Knowing that the preacher was preaching there they made greater haste; yet, as they were drawing near, suddenly there was a commotion in the mass, and it began to break up and disperse.

Ben-Hur, and a multitude collected down close by the bank, and yet another multitude on the western shore. Knowing that the preacher was preaching there they made greater haste; yet, as they were drawing near, suddenly there was a commotion in the mass, and it began to break up and disperse.

They turned away too late!

"Let us stay here," said Ben-Hur to Balthasar, who was wringing his hands. "The prophet may come this way."

The people were too intent upon what they had heard, and too busy in discussion, to notice the new comers.

Ben-Hur went on, and it seemed that the opportunity to see the preacher was lost to the latter, up the river not far away they beheld a person coming towards them of such singular appearance they forgot all else.

Outwardly the man was ruddy and unshaven, even savage. Over his tunic, a visage of the hue of brown parchment, over his shoulders and down his back below the middle, in which like locks, fell a covering of un-scourched hair. His eyes were burning bright. His right shoulder was naked, and of the colour of his face, and quite as meagre; a shirt of the coarsest camel's hair—coarse as Bedouin tent cloth—clothed the rest of his person to the knee, being gathered at the waist by a broad girdle of untanned leather. His feet were bare. A scrip, also of untanned leather, was fastened to the girdle. He used a knob of staff to help him forward.

His movement was quick, decided, and strangely watchful. Every little while he tossed the unruly hair from his eyes, and peered round as if searching for somebody.

The fair Egyptian surveyed the son of the Desert with surprise, not to say disgust. Presently, raising the curtain of his hood, he saw the face of Ben-Hur, who sat on his horse near by.

"It is the herald of thy King?"

"It is the Baptist," he replied without looking up.

In truth, he was himself more than disappointed. Despite his familiarity with the ascetic colonist in Engedi—their dress, their indifference to all worldly opinion, their constancy to vows which gave them over to every imaginable suffer-

ing of body, and separated them from others of their kind as absolutely as if they had not been born like them—and notwithstanding he had been notified on the way to look for a preacher whose simple description of himself was a Voice from the Wilderness—still Ben-Hur's dream of the King, which he had so often dreamed, much had colored all his thought of him, so that he never doubted to find in the forerunner some sign or token of the goodness and royalty he was announcing. Gazing at the savage figure before him, the long trains of courtiers whom he had seen in the corridors at Rome arose before him, forcing a comparison. Shocked, ashamed, bewildered, he could only answer: "It is the Baptist."

With Balthasar it was very different. The ways of God, he knew, were not as men would have them. He had seen the Saviour a child in a manger, and he was prepared by his faith, for the rude and simple in connection with the Divine reappearing. So he kept his seat, his hands crossed upon his breast, his lips moving in prayer. He was not expecting a king.

In this time of such rest to the Jew, he had seen a signal to all the people in sight; and they also stopped each in the pose of a listener; and when the hush was perfect, slowly the staff in the Baptist's right hand came down pointed at the stranger.

All those who before were but listeners became spectators. Under the same impulse, Balthasar and Ben-Hur fixed their gaze upon the man pointed out, and both took the same impression, only in different degree. He was moving slowly towards them in a clear space a little to the right, in which they were a few feet apart. He was of a stature, and slender, even delicate. His action was calm and deliberate, like that habitual to men much given to serious thought upon grave subjects; and it well became his costume, which was an under-garment full sleeved and reaching to the ankles, and a robe of camel's hair, which he carried the usual handkerchief for the neck, the red fillet swinging loose down his side. Except the fillet and a narrow border of blue at the lower edge of the tunic, his attire was of linen yellowed with dust and road-stains. Possibly he had been to the bath, and he tended to the tunic, which were blue and white, as prescribed by law for rabbis. His sandals were of the simplest kind. He was without scrip or girdle or staff.

These points of appearance, however, the three beholders did not see, and the head of the man, which was the real source of the spell they were all looking at, was not seen.

The head was open to the cloudless light, and it was as if the man's hair had been swept away, and parted in the middle, and auburn in tint, with a tendency to reddish golden where most strongly touched by the sun. Under a broad, low forehead, under black well-arched brows, beamed eyes dark-blue and large, and softness of eye, and the softness of the eye, the paler of the complexion, the fine texture of the hair, and the softness of the beard, which fell in waves over his throat to his breast, never a soldier but would have laughed at him in encounter, never a woman who had softened to exceeding tenderness, never a child that would clasp him with quick instinct, have given him its hand and whole artless trust; nor might any one have said he was not beautiful.

The features, it should be further said, were ruled by a certain expression of goodness, which might with equal correctness have been called the effect of intelligence, love, pity or sorrow; though, in better speech, it was a blending of them all—a look easy to fancy as the mark of a sinless soul doomed to the sight and understanding of the uttermost of heaven, and which, when it was passing, yet withal no one could have observed the face with a thought of weakness in the man; so, at least, would not they who know that the qualities mentioned—love, sorrow, pity,—are the results of a consciousness of strength to bear suffering, of a power of strength to do: such has been the might of martyrs and devotees and the myriads written down in saintly calendars. And such, indeed, was the air of this One.

Such, indeed, he drew near—nearer the three.

Now Ben-Hur, mounted and spear in hand, as an object to claim the glance of a king; yet the eyes of the man approaching were all the time raised above him—and not to Ira, whose loveliness has been so often remarked, but to Balthasar, the old and unscrupulous.

The hush was profound.

Presently the Baptist still pointing with his staff, cried in a loud voice: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

The many standing still, arrested by the action of the speaker, and listening for what might follow, were struck with awe by the power of vision above that of his understanding; upon Balthasar they were overpowering. He was there to see once more the Redeemer of men. The faith which had brought him the singular privileges of the time long gone about yet in his heart and if now it gave him a power of vision above that of his understanding, it was to see and know Him for whom he was looking—better than calling the power a miracle, let it be thought of as the faculty of a soul not yet

entirely released from the divine relations to which it had been formerly admitted, or as the fitting reward of a life in that age so without examples of holiness—a life itself a miracle. The ideal of his faith was before him, perfect in face, form, dress, action, age; and he was in his view, and the vision was so real, that if anything should happen to identify the stranger beyond all doubt!

And that was what did happen. Exactly at the fitting moment, as if to assure the trembling Egyptian, the Baptist repeated the cry: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!"

Balthasar fell upon his knees. For him there was no need of explanation; and as if the Baptist knew it, he turned to those more immediately about him staring in wonder, and continued:

"This is he whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me; for He was before me. And I knew Him not; but that he should be manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I saw and I testify that He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, 'Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw and bare record, that this—'he paused, his hand pointing and Simonides, who had been standing near, and who gave a more absolute certainty to both his words and the conclusions intended—'I bare record, that this is the Son of God!'"

"It is He, it is He!" Balthasar cried with upraised tearful eyes. Next moment he sank down insensible.

All the time it would be remembered, Ben-Hur was studying the face of the stranger, though with an interest entirely different. He was not insensible to its purity of feature, and its thoughtfulness, tenderness, humility, and holiness; but just then there was room in his mind for but one thought, and that was, "Who is this man? Is he the Messiah or King? Never was apparition more unroyal. Nay, looking at that calm, benignant countenance, the very idea of war and conquest, and lust of dominion, smote him like a profanation."

He said, as if speaking to his own heart, "Ben-Hur, he is not the Messiah, and he is not the King. This man has not come to rebuild the throne of Solomon; He has neither the nature nor the genius of Herod; King He may be, but not of another and greater than Rome."

This was not a conclusion with Ben-Hur, but an impression merely; and while he was looking at the man, his memory began to throng and struggle. "Surely," he said to himself, "I have seen the man; but where and when?" That look, so calm, so pitiful, so loving, had somewhere in a past time beamed upon him as that of a man who had been to the bath, and he tended to the tunic, which were blue and white, as prescribed by law for rabbis. His sandals were of the simplest kind. He was without scrip or girdle or staff.

These hands had helped him when he was perishing. The face had been to him the face of the man, which was the real source of the spell they were all looking at, was not seen.

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left of the tragic circumstances so ruinous to the family, but the reformation was in a style richer than before. At every point, indeed, a visitor was met by evidences of the higher tastes acquired by the young proprietor during his years of residence in the villa by Misenum and in the home of the Roman aristocracy.

Now it should not be inferred from this explanation that Ben-Hur had publicly assumed ownership of the property. In his opinion, the hour for that was not yet come. Neither had he yet taken his proper name. Passing the time in the labours of preparation in Galilee, he waited patiently the action of the Nazarene, who became daily more and more a mystery to him, and by prodigies done, often before his eyes, kept him in a state of anxious doubt both as to his character and mission. Occasionally he came up to the Holy City, stopping at the paternal house; always, however, as a stranger and a guest.

These visits of Ben-Hur, it should also be observed, were for more than mere rest from labour. Balthasar and Ira made their home in the palace; and the charm of the daughter was still upon her. He had dared to love her, and he was worthy his father; though feebler in body, held him an unwilling listener to speeches of astonishing power, urging the divinity of the wandering miracle-worker of whom they were all so expectant.

As to Simonides and Esther, they had arrived from Antioch only a few days before this their appearance—a wearisome journey to the merchant, borne, as he had been, in a palanquin swung between two camels, which, in their careening, did not always keep the same step. But now that he was come, the good man, it seemed, could not see enough of his native land. He delighted in the perch upon the roof, and spent most of his day hours there seated in an arm-chair, the duplicate of that one kept for him in the cabinet over the storehouse by the Orontes. In the shade of the summer house he could drink fully of the inspiring air lying lightly upon the familiar hill, run its course, and set as it used to in the far-gone, not a habit lost; and with Esther by him it was much easier to rise close to the sky, to bring back the other Esther, his love in youth, his wife, dearer growing with the passage of years, and all things that were dear to him. Every day a messenger brought him a despatch from Sanballat, in charge of the big commerce left behind; and every day a despatch left him for Sanballat with directions of such minute detail as to exclude all judgment of the man, and all that he was not the most mindful of men.

As Esther started in return to the summer-house, the sunlight fell softly upon the dustless roof showing her a woman now—small, graceful in form, of regular features, rosy with youth, and with a bright smile, and a beautiful with the outshining of devoted nature—a woman to be loved because loving was a habit of life irrepressible with her.

She looked at the package as she turned, paused, looked at it a second time more closely than at first; and the blood rose to her forehead, and she was Ben-Hur's. With quickened steps she hastened on.

Simonides held the package a moment while he also inspected the seal. Breaking it open, he gave her the roll it contained.

"Read," he said.

His eyes were upon her as she spoke, and instantly a troubled expression fell upon his own face.

"You know who it is from, I see, Esther."

"Yes—from our master."

Though the manner was halting, she met his gaze with modest sincerity. Slowly his chin sank into the roll of flesh pushed out under it like a cushion.

"You love him, Esther," he said quietly.

"Yes," she answered.

"Have you thought well of what you do?"

"I have tried not to think of him, father, except as the master to whom I am dutifully bound. The effort has not helped me to strength."

"A good girl, a good girl, even as thy mother was," he said, dropping into reverie, from which she roused him by unrolling the paper.

"The Lord forgive me, but—but thy love might not have been vainly given had I kept fast hold of all I had, as I might have done—such power is there in money!"

"It would have been worse for me had you, my father, for then I had been unworthy a look from him, and without pride in you. Shall I not read now?"

"In a moment," he said. "Let me, for your sake, my child, show you the worst. Seeing it with me may make it less terrible to you. His love, Esther, is all to leave him. By the wall yonder we can talk."

"I know it," she said calmly.

"The Egyptian has him in her net," he continued. "She has the cunning of her race, with beauty to help her—much beauty, great cunning; but, like her race again, no heart. The daughter who despises her father will bring her husband to grief."

"Does she that?"

Simonides went on: "Balthasar is a wise man who has been wonderfully favoured for a Gentle, and his faith becomes him; yet she makes a jest of it. I heard her say, speaking of her father, 'The following youth are execrable; nothing is admirable in the aged except wisdom, and when that goes from them, they should die.' A cruel speech, fit for a Roman. I applied it to myself, knowing a feebleness like her father's will come to me also—may, it be not far off. But you, my child, will never say of me—no, never—'It were better he were dead.' No, your mother was a daughter of Judah."

With half-formed tears, she kissed him, and said, "I am my mother's child."

"Yes, and my daughter—my daughter, who is to me all the Temple was to Solomon. For the satisfaction of the reader, we stop to say that it is the twenty first day of March, nearly three years after the announcement of Christ at Bethabara.

In the meanwhile, Malluch, acting for Ben-Hur, who could no longer endure the emptiness and decay of his father's house, had thought it from Pontus Pilate, and in process of repair, gates, courts, lawns, stairways, terraces, rooms, and roof had been cleaned and thoroughly restored; not only was there no reminder

of the tragic circumstances so ruinous to the family, but the reformation was in a style richer than before. At every point, indeed, a visitor was met by evidences of the higher tastes acquired by the young proprietor during his years of residence in the villa by Misenum and in the home of the Roman aristocracy.

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