

LILITH.

By JULES LEMAITRE.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.

Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

And they said unto him, in Bethlehem of Judea.

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star stopped.

And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search, bring me word again, that I may come and worship also.

Being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth.—Matthew, ii. 1-16.

The Princess Lilith, daughter of King Herod, mused as she reclined upon a bed of purple, and the negress, Noun, waved a fan of feathers over her forehead, and the cat, Astaroth, slept at her feet.

Princess Lilith was fifteen years of age. Her eyes were as deep as the water of a cistern, and her mouth was like a cyclamen flower.

She mused of her mother, Queen Miriam, who died when Lilith was still little more than a baby. She did not know that her father had killed her in a fit of jealousy; but she knew that he kept her body in the depths of a secret chamber, embalmed in honey and spices, and that he still wept for her.

She mused upon her father, King Herod, taciturn, and always ill. Sometimes he shut himself up in his chamber, and there one could hear him scream aloud. It was because he thought he saw those whom he had caused to die,—his step brother, Kostobar; his wife Miriam; his sons, Aristobulus and Alexander, Lilith's brothers; his stepmother, Alexandra; her son, Antipater; the doctor-of-law, Bababon-Bouts, and many others. Although Lilith knew nothing of all this, her father always inspired her with great terror.

She mused upon the Messiah looked for by the Jews and of whom she had heard so much from her nurse, Eglia, now dead. And although the Messiah would be king in Herod's place, she said to herself that she would very much like to see him.

Lastly she mused upon little Hozael, the son of her foster-sister, Zebonda, who lived in Bethlehem. Hozael was a year old. He laughed merrily and was beginning to talk. Lilith loved him tenderly; and almost every day he ordered her maids to be harnessed into her cedar chariot, and went with her negress, Noun, to visit the little Hozael.

Lilith mused upon all three things, and then it seemed to her that she was very much alone in the world, and that without little Hozael she would be very sad.

Presently Lilith went into the garden to walk under the great sycamores. There she met old Zabulon, who had been formerly captain of the king's guard. Herod had replaced his Jewish guard by Roman soldiers, but having confidence in old Zabulon, he had

given him the care of that part of the palace inhabited by Lilith.

Old Zabulon, who had been feeble for many years, sat sunning himself upon a stone bench. His back was so bent with age that his long beard reached to his knees.

Lilith said to him: "Thou art sad, old Zabulon."

"Yee, Princess Lilith, because I have learned from the centurion that the king has given orders to kill, tomorrow morning at dawn, all the children in Bethlehem under two years of age."

"Why?"

"The wise men have announced that the Messiah is born. But it is not known how to recognize him, and the wise men have not returned to tell where they have found him. By killing all the babies in Bethlehem, the king is sure that the Messiah cannot escape him."

"That is true," said Lilith. "That is a clever device." Then after a moment's reflection: "Could I see him?"

"Who?"

"The Messiah!"

"In order to see him, one must know where he is. And, if we knew where to find him the king would not be obliged to kill all the other little children of the town."

"That is true," said Lilith. Then she added in a low voice, as if she were afraid of her own words: "My father is very wicked." Then suddenly: "But little Hozael?"

"Little Hozael," said Zabulon, "will die with the others, for the soldiers will search every house."

"But I am very sure that little Hozael is not the Messiah. How could he be the Messiah? He is the son of my foster-sister."

"Ask your father to spare him," said Zabulon.

"I dare not," said Lilith. Then she resumed: "I shall go myself with Noun and get Hozael, and hide him in my room. Then he will be safe, for the king almost never comes there."

Lilith ordered the mules to be harnessed in her cedar chariot, sped to Bethlehem with Noun, entered the home of her foster-sister, Zebonda, and said:

"It is a long time since I have seen Hozael. I should like to carry him to my palace and keep him for a day and a night. The baby is weaned and has no longer need of thy care. I will give him a dress of hyacinth and a collar of pearls." She said nothing to Zebonda of what she had learned from Zabulon, so afraid was she of the king.

But she noticed that Zebonda's face shone with unwonted joy.

"Why art thou so joyous?"

Zebonda hesitated a moment, then replied: "I am joyous, Princess Lilith, because you love my son."

"And thy husband, where is he?"

Again Zebonda hesitated, and answered: "He has gone to gather his flocks on the mountain-side."

Noun hid the little Hozael under her long veils; and Lilith and the good negress returned to the palace just as the sun was setting.

When Lilith reached her chamber, she took Hozael upon her lap, and the baby laughed and tried to pull the little princess' long ear pendants. But suddenly, Noun, who was preparing some corn gruel for the child in the next room, rushed in crying, "The King! Here comes the king!"

Lilith had only time to hide Hozael in a large basket and cover him with a pile of silks and bright wools, before King Herod entered with a slow, heavy tread, the chains and plates of gold, with which he was covered, shaking with each movement. His back was bent, and his blood-shot eyes glared in his terrible face; his chin shook so with the palsy that his bristly

beard seemed to sudder. He said to Lilith: "Whence comest thou?"

She replied: "From Jericho." And she raised toward the king her eyes, as the water of a cistern.

"Oh! how she resembles her!" murmured Herod.

At this moment, a little cry came from the basket.

"Will you keep quiet?" said Lilith to the cat, Astaroth, who slept on the rug. Then she said to the King: "My father, you seem troubled; would you like me to sing to you?"

And taking her zither, she sang him a song about roses.

And the King murmured: "Oh! that voice!"

Then he fled, as if struck with fear, because Lilith's voice and eyes recalled to him the voice and eyes of Queen Miriam.

Lilith went into the garden and found old Zabulon weeping.

"Why does thou weep, old Zabulon?"

"You know the cause, Princess Lilith. I weep because the King wishes to kill the little child who is the Messiah."

"But," said Lilith, "if he is really the Messiah, men cannot have the power to kill him."

"God wishes us to help him," replied Zabulon. "You who are so good and compassionate, should warn the father and mother of this little child."

"But where shall I find them?"

"Question the people of Bethlehem."

"But ought I to save one who will chase my father from this palace, and by whom I may some day become a poor prisoner, or a beggar in the streets?"

"That day is far removed," said Zabulon, "and the Messiah is now only a tiny babe, more helpless even than little Hozael."

"But are you sure that he is the Messiah?" demanded Lilith.

"Yes," said Zabulon, "because he was born in Bethlehem at the time appointed by the prophets, and the wise men have seen his star."

"He must be very beautiful, although he is so small; don't you think so, Zabulon?"

"It is written that he shall be the most beautiful among the children of men."

"I shall go to see him," said Lilith.

When night came, Lilith enveloped herself in long black veils; and the bracelets and circles of gold upon her arms and ankles, the collars about her neck and the precious stones with which she was covered, shone through her veils as softly as the stars in the sky.

And thus Lilith resembled the night, whose name she bore; for in Hebrew "Lilith" signifies "the night."

She left the palace secretly with the negress, Noun, and as she walked, she mused: "I should not want the Messiah to take the crown from my father because it would be very hard for me not to live in a beautiful palace any more, and not to have any soft rugs, and pretty dresses, and perfumes and jewels. But, still, I do not want them to kill this little, new-born child. So I shall tell my father that I have discovered its hiding place, and, as a recompense for this service, I shall entreat him to spare the child and keep him in his palace. Thus he cannot harm us, and if he is really the Messiah, he will let us share his power."

Lilith found Zebonda and her husband, Methouel, in prayer. Both seemed filled with great joy. Lilith thought her of a ruse.

"Hozael is very well," said she, "and I shall bring him back to you tomorrow. But, since you know where to find the Messiah, lead me to him. I am come to adore him."

Methouel was a simple man, little disposed to think ill of others, so he replied: "I will show you the way, Princess Lilith."

When they reached the spot where the infant lay, Lilith was greatly as-

tonished, for she had expected to see something extraordinary and magnificent without knowing exactly what, and she only saw a hut built against a rock and in this hut an ass, an ox, a man who appeared to be a workman, a woman of the people, beautiful, yes, but pale and delicate, and poorly clad. And in the manger, lying upon the straw, was a little child, whom at first glance she thought like any other child. But when she drew nearer, she saw its eyes; and in those eyes a look not that of a babe; an infinite sweetness, more than human, and she became aware that the stable was only lighted by the light which emanated from him.

She said to the young mother, "What is your name?"

"Miryam."

"And your little boy?"

"Jesus."

"He seems to be very good."

"He moans sometimes, but he never cries."

"Will you let me kiss him?" "Yes madam," said Miryam.

Lilith stopped and kissed the child upon the forehead, and was a little vexed that she did not kneel.

"So," said Lilith, "this Child is the Messiah?"

"You have said it, madam."

"And He will be King of the Jews?"

"It is for that that God has sent Him."

"But then He will make war and kill many men, and He will dethrone King Herod or his successor?"

"No," said Miryam, "for His kingdom is not of this world. He will have neither guards nor soldiers; He will have neither palaces nor treasures; He will not inflict taxes upon the people, and He will live like the poorest fisherman on the Lake of Genesareth. He will be the servant of the poor and humble. He will heal the sick and comfort the afflicted. He will teach truth and justice. It is over hearts, not bodies, that He will reign. He will suffer, to teach us the price of suffering. He will be the King of Love, for He will love all men. And He will teach those who are tormented with a longing which this world cannot satisfy, where their poor hearts can find peace and joy. And no doubt He will have a throne."

"Ah, now you see!" said Lilith, still resisting.

"But," resumed Miryam, "the throne will be a cross. He will die upon a cross, to expiate the sins of men, so that God, His Father, may have pity upon them."

Lilith listened in astonishment. Slowly she turned her head toward the manger. The Babe was gazing at her; and, vanquished by the caress of those deep eyes, murmured: "No one ever told me those things before," and falling upon her knees, she adored Him.

"I know," said Lilith, as she rose, "that King Herod will search for the Child to kill Him. Take the ass and fly. I will pay its master!"

Following the narrow paths, which wound in and out among the round hills, the little company soon reached the plain.

"Here," said the princess, "I must leave you. I am the Princess Lilith, daughter of King Herod. Remember me."

And as they disappeared in the darkness of the night, Joseph leading the ass upon which sat Miryam, holding the infant Jesus in her arms, Lilith followed with her eyes the aureole encircling His divine brow. As the pale, mysterious light disappeared behind a forest of sycamores, Lilith heard the tramp of horses' hoofs, and the clanking of swords, upon the opposite road. It was the squadron of Roman soldiers marching toward Bethlehem.

Every one knows that the Princess Lilith was one of the holy women who followed Jesus on the day of His sacrifice, and that little Hozael was one of the first disciples of Christ, the Saviour.