

not and to speak, and slowly turning round in his chair he fully confronted the Accused, who at the same instant lifted His noble head and met the anxious, scrutinizing regard of His judge with an open look of fearless patience and infinite tenderness. Meeting that look Pilate trembled—bald anon, forcing himself to assume an air of frigid composure, he spoke aloud in grave authoritative accents:

"Answerest thou nothing? Hearest thou not how many things are witnessed against thee?"

Then and only then, the hitherto immovable white-robed figure stirred,—and advancing with slow and regal grace approached Pilate more nearly, still looking at him. One bright ray of the risen sun fell slantingly through the side window and glistened star like on the bronze-gold of the rich hair that clustered in thick waves upon His brow, and as He kept His shining eyes upon His judge, He smiled serenely even as one who pardons a sin before hearing its confession. But no word passed His lips. Pilate recoiled,—and icy cold chilled the blood in his veins,—involuntarily he rose, and fell back step by step, grasping at the carved gold projections of his judicial throne to steady his faltering limbs, for there was something in the quiet onward gliding of that snowy garmented Shape that filled his soul with dread, and suggested to his mind old myths and legends of the past, when Deity appearing suddenly to men, had consumed them in a breath with the lightning of great glory. And that one terrific glory when he stood thus face to face with the Divine Accused seemed to him an eternity. All unconsciously to himself his countenance paled to a ghastly haggardness, and scarcely knowing what he did, he raised his hands appealingly as though to avert some great and crushing blow. The learned Jews who were grouped around him stared at his terror-stricken attitude in wonderment, and exchanged glances of vexation and dismay, while one of the elders, a dark-eyed, crafty-visaged man, leaned forward hastily and touched him on the shoulder, saying in a low tone:

"What ails thee, Pilate? Surely thou art smitten with palsy, or some delusion numbs thy senses! Hasten, we beseech thee, to pronounce sentence, for the hours wear on apace—and at this season of the Passover, 'twere well and seemly that thou shouldst give the multitude their will. What is this malefactor to thee? Let him be crucified, for he is guilty of treason, since he calls himself a king. Full well thou knowest we have no king but Caesar, yet yonder fellow boldly saith he is king of the Jews. Question him, whether or not he hath not boasted falsely of power!"

Pilate gazed round at his adviser bewilderedly—he felt as though he were entangled in the mazes of an evil dream where demons whispered dark hints of unworded crimes. Sick and cold to the very heart, he yet realized that he must make an effort to interrogate the prisoner as he was bidden, and, moistening his parched lips, he at last succeeded in enunciating the necessary query, albeit his accents were so faint and husky as to be scarcely audible—"Art thou the king of the Jews?"

An intense silence followed. Then a full, penetrating voice, sweeter than the sweetest music, stirred the air.

"Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?"

Pilate's face flushed, and his hand grasped the back of his chair convulsively. He gave a gesture of impatience, and answered abruptly, yet tremulously,—

"Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief have delivered thee unto me; what hast thou done?"

A light as of some inward fire irradiated the deep lustrous eyes of the "Nazarene," a dreamy, meditative smile parted His lips. Looking so,

and smiling thus, His glorious aspect made the silence eloquent, and Pilate's authoritative demand, "What hast thou done?" seemed answered without speech as if he said:

"What have I done? I have made life sweet, and robbed death of bitterness; there is honor for men and tenderness for women; there is hope for all, Heaven for all, God for all!—and the lesson of love—love divine for ever through My Name!"

But these great facts remained unuttered, for, as yet they were beyond mortal comprehension, and with the faint dreamy smile still giving a poetic languor of deep thought to every line of His countenance, the Accused answered slowly,—

"My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews. But—now is my kingdom not from hence?"

And, drawing His majestic figure up to its full height, He raised His head and looked up towards the loftiest window of the Hall, now glittering diamond like in the saffron-tinted rays of the swiftly ascending sun. His attitude was so unspeakably grand and suggestive of power, that Pilate again recoiled, with that sickening sense of helpless terror clutching at his heart anew. He stole a furtive and anxious glance at the chief priests and elders, who were leaning forward on their benches listening attentively. Caiaphas smiled satirically and exchanged a side whisper with Annas, but otherwise no one volunteered to speak. Surely against his will, Pilate continued his examination. Feigning an unconcern he was far from feeling, he asked his next question half carelessly, half kindly,—

"Art thou a King, then?"

"With a sublime gesture, the Accused flashed one burning glance upon all who waited breathlessly for his reply—then looked straightly and steadily full into Pilate's eyes. "Thou sayest!"

And as he uttered the words, the sun, climbing to the topmost arch of the opposite window, beamed through it in a round blaze of glory, and flooded the judgment hall with ripples of gold and crimson, circling the Divine brows with a glittering rainbow radiance as though the very heavens had set their crown and signet upon the splendor of a Truth revealed!

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