

Choice Literature.

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A KING OF TYRE.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

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CHAPTER XVII.

An hour later a white chiton might have been seen hanging heavily in the sultry air from the limbs of a juniper bush, that grew out of a sandy mound between two great boulders on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Under the shelter of the rocks were two men, the one having on only a pair of leather trousers, the other, but for a close-fitting shirt, entirely nude. This was not the most decorous position in which to find the King of Tyre and his aristocratic nobleman; yet they both seemed supremely, even hilariously happy. King Hiram had completed the story of his adventures; and Hanno, donning his chiton, entered upon the account of the events that had occurred recently at Tyre.

The priests, he said, after consultation, and with some misgiving as to their policy, agreed to encourage the popular belief that King Hiram had been bodily translated to some heavenly world by the favour and power of Baal. They boasted thus a greater miracle on the part of their god than those reported in the olden times of the exploits of Jehovah in Israel, who took Enoch, Moses and Elijah away without their seeing death. For several days the Tyrian populace held high festival in devout celebration of this astounding event. The city was given over to orgies that drained much wealth into the coffers of the priests. Half the jewels of Tyre and heaps of coins were stored in the Temple of Melkarth. A hundred skins of choicest wine were poured into the sacred lake around the Maabed. So many men offered themselves for the priestly occupation, expecting miraculous reward, that some of the shops of the artisans were closed for lack of workmen, and many ships were delayed in sailing because they were unmanned.

Perhaps Ahimelek was the most ostentatious donor, "unless," said Hanno, "I myself surpassed him in extravagant zeal. Three ship-loads of dye-stuffs I emptied into the Egyptian harbour, empurpling the water and staining the stones of the quay with royal tints against the time of our king's return.

"The priests were not long in discovering the real method of your disappearance, but to have confessed it would have brought the whole affair into such disrepute that the people would have torn Egbalus and the rest of us to pieces."

"But was your hand not suspected?" asked Hiram.

"I think not. I anticipated that I too should have to flee, and prepared to do so; but the falling of the image, through the accidental burning of some wooden supports, completely blocked the passage from those who investigated it; and I have since removed every royal rag you left in the vault beyond."

"Egbalus summoned a few of the more cautious and desperate, among whom I was surprised to find myself, and revealed his own view and policy. The shrewd old fox was certain that you had escaped by some ruse. You must be tracked and killed, even if you had gone to where the Nile begins in the melting of the mountains, or had become a savage in the islands of tin. Priests were despatched to Greece, to Susa, to Damascus, to Memphis and Thebes. A dozen are tracking this Jew's land. I volunteered in such fine frenzy—that fresh gash on my breast is the mark of my vow—that Egbalus hugged me to his villainous heart, and called me a true son of Baal; and offered me the fairest girl born of his concubine Tissa for wife when I returned."

"I thought to go out alone. But I knew little of these inland roads, so yoked myself with old Abdemon, the shrewdest of all the priests. He was poor in tramping and weak of arm, but had the wildest head for this sort of business. He knew every path in the Jew's land. I felt sure that he would get your foot-prints, unless you had taken to flight in the air; so I joined with him. He struck your trail at once. He scented you near the crater of Giscala, and put the two devils you spoke of on guard there, while we watched here by the sea."

"He was drowned when the boat sank?" asked Hiram.

"Yes, he sank like a stone. If he had swum a stroke I would have choked him in the water. Indeed, when I saw your boat go down I drew a dagger on him, but before I could use it our boat was in the same straits."

"But what of Zillah?"

"There is nothing to report, except what was known to all before the day of the sacrifice. Her father had made a close alliance with Egbalus. Believing that you were doomed, he offered his daughter to your cousin Rubaal, and pledged the same dowry as he had pledged to you."

"That shall never be!" cried Hiram with impatient fury.

"I will return to Tyre, steal my way into the city, cut the throats of these wretches, and flee with my betrothed."

"You shall return, but not now."

"Why not now? I cannot, I will not wander about like a cowardly fugitive."

"Wait, at least, my king, until you get the mail on your hand to strike the great blow that will shatter all this horrid tyranny at once. No harm can come to Zillah. It was because I knew your hot blood and quick determination that I sought more eagerly to find you, and prevent your sudden return. Trust me in Tyre. The marriage with Rubaal cannot take place until the next festival of Astarte and Tam-muz. A hundred things may happen before that. Patience! and then not mere vengeance, King Hiram, but your restoration and the renewed splendour of your power! I believe in it, and if the gods will not send it we will make it. Loving you as I do, I am not risking my life merely for yours, but for your crown as well. Tyre must be saved, made rich, powerful, the mistress of Sidon, the queen of the Great Sea, the conqueror of—"

"Peace! peace! good! Hanno. Let's first think of how to save a whole skin, instead of gilding a new crown. But see! your boat has floated, and is drifting this way."

Hanno looked sharply at the distant object.

"And, by the mouth of Dagon I old Abdemon in on her, clinging to her bottom."

"I will smash his skull with the very stone I had selected for yours," cried the almost frantic king. "If I cannot dispense justice in my own kingdom, I can here."

"No, no," said Hanno; "leave him to me. Get you gone out of sight. If he has seen you I will put him out of the way. If he has not seen you, he will confirm the report that you were drowned. That will recall all the priests from pursuit, and leave the field free for us to work. Hide away!"

Hanno plunged into the sea, and swam to the floating wreck. Abdemon was barely alive. He had ceased to cling, and was lying limp across the bottom of the upturned boat. The sea had subsided, else he had been washed off. It was nearly another hour before Hanno was able to work the wreck to the beach and carry the nearly unconscious priest ashore.

As Abdemon recovered his senses, it was plain that he had seen nothing of what had occurred.

"The Cabeiri have avenged Baal," cried he. "I could have died willingly after I saw the sea swallow up the traitorous king, but I could not bear the thought of being myself drowned in the same water. Baal be praised! Baal be praised!"

"And now," suggested Hanno, "we must hasten back to Tyre with the news. The sooner the search ceases, and the priests return, the less danger of suspicion by the people. Baal has taken his offering, whether by fire or water it matters not that the crowd should know."

"Baal be praised!" echoed Abdemon.

"Could you not return alone?" asked Hanno. I, as a new priest, and one assigned by our most worshipful chief to the superintendency of our temple property, would learn of the practices of worship among these tribes of Ammon and Moab. And then I would visit Jerusalem, where these Jews are rebuilding their temple. I may learn much that will add to the splendour and impressiveness of our worship."

After some further consultation Hanno's plans were approved by his fellow-priest. They talked about the renovation of temples and the coming glory of the priestly guild, when the wealth of Ahimelek should augment the treasury of Melkarth.

Near nightfall a fisherman rowed Hanno and Abdemon across the upper end of the Sea of Galilee to one of the little hamlets there, and under the starlight he brought Hanno back to the eastern shore.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The veracious chronicler of the adventures of King Hiram is compelled to pass over in silence a period of several months. As certain rivers disappear, and flow for a distance beneath the ground, so the course of events, as directed by the discreet and wary Hanno, was for a while inscrutable. We will follow it, however, from the point where it came again into the daylight of observation.

Since men began to travel on the earth, innkeepers have been noted for the courtesy, tact and assiduity with which they have reaped the rewards of their business. On a certain day Solomon Ben Eli, innkeeper at Jericho, in the valley of the Lower Jordan, found all the above-named qualities of his disposition exercised to their utmost. This was the day before the opening of the annual Feast of Tabernacles at Jerusalem, during the seven days of which celebration the men from all parts of the land came together at the Sacred City.

The hostelry at Jericho—called Beth Elisha, in honour of the prophet whose miraculous cure of salt once healed the spring hard by, which now supplied the town with delightful water—was a long, low building, rambling and diverse as the various generations which had successively built upon it. During the night all its rooms and ingles had been crowded with pilgrims from up the Jordan and beyond it. Early in the morning, long before the sun had looked over the beetling cliffs of Moab, the multitude poured forth into the court-yard. They were clad in gay garments of many colours, and were not unlike the variously-plumed doves which came out of their adjacent cootes, and filled the air with their flapping wings and querulous cooing. The shed that enclosed the opposite side of the yard discharged a more turbulent crowd of horses and camels, asses and mules, which were kicking and rumping one another in the attempt to get their noses into the great stone trough that stood in the centre of the court. The crisp air resounded with the unedifying matins of mingled grunts, neighs and brays, which were far from being reduced to harmony by the shouts of the drivers.

It was easier for the host to seem ubiquitous than it was for him to command in himself such a variety of tempers as the occasion required. He must placate those who grumbled at their reckoning; hasten his laggard servants; adjudicate the quarrels of guests over the uncertain ownership of bits of harness; must smile, yet frown; beam knowingly, yet knit his brows in simulated perplexity; be patient, yet keep the sharpest eye and quickest tongue; and shift all these aspects in such rapid succession that they seemed to be simultaneous. We may forgive this prince of innkeepers if for a moment he did not maintain to perfection his manifold part. Such was the moment when a servant announced to him that Rabbi Shimeal, the most noted man in the synagogue at Jericho, would speak with him at the gate.

"A pretty time of day for him to come! I'll warrant he has been up all night owling it over some verse of the law. Or he wants a gift for the synagogue. Tell him his affairs must wait until I can get this holy crowd off for the Temple," was Solomon Ben Eli's petulant response.

The servant soon returned with the statement that the Rabbi Shimeal must have his assistance in providing a beast to convey to Jerusalem no less a personage than Ezra, the Great Scribe, who was a guest at the rabbi's house, and whose animal had given out under the terrible heat of the previous day, as he had journeyed through the villages of the Jordan plain, pursuing his holy work of inspecting the copies of the Law used in the newly-established synagogues.

Solomon Ben Eli was shocked at this news, as if an angel's wing had brushed his face.

"Heaven forgive me!" said he, making low obeisance before his servant, in obliviousness to the fact that that son of Gibbon was not the great man of God himself.

"But this is unfortunate," he added, rubbing his hands

nervously. "I have not a horse left, nor a camel, and not even an ass."

The attention of the bystanders being drawn to the host's dilemma, a marvellous spirit of sympathy with him and of devotion to Ezra was instantly displayed. Every one urged upon his neighbour the duty of self-sacrifice, as if each were ashamed of the others for allowing the Great Scribe's detention or even inconvenience.

"If my horse was strong and handsome like yours," said one, "I would gallop at once to the rabbi's. Mine is but a spavined beast, and it would be a disgrace for the holy man of God to bestride him."

"I would instantly offer my steed," responded the other, "but he is poorly broken, and the Scribe—be it reverently spoken—is too old to control him. I could never forgive myself if my beast were the cause of Ezra's breaking his holy neck among the rocks of Cherith."

A young man stood by who was noticeable from the fact that his garments were richer in texture than those of most of the pilgrims, though he was not arrayed for the festival. His cloak, which he drew closely around him as a protection from the chill morning air, was that of a traveller. Beneath it he wore a belt, which supported both a sword and an inkhorn, and thus indicated the trade of merchant. The short black beard about his lower features was balanced by a head-dress of black silk, which was bound about his brows with a purple cord, and fell down upon the back of his neck and shoulders. He was plainly a Phœnician, but confessed that many months had elapsed since he had been to the coast. For his identification and safety from the imposition of petty officials in the various lands he might have occasion to traverse in following his trade, he carried a letter issued by King Hiram of Tyre, and bearing the royal seal. Similar letters were borne as passports by all the captains of vessels and masters of caravans who represented the genuine business houses in the cities of Phœnicia; and by these credentials they were distinguished from the irresponsible adventurers who, in the convenient disguise of travelling merchants, infested all those countries.

The young merchant, observing the perplexity of Solomon, the host, addressed him:—

"If his Excellency the Great Scribe will accept the courtesy of a stranger, let him take any of my beasts."

"Thanks, noble Marduk!" replied the innkeeper, in grateful relief. "But I regret that my own people are thus rebuked by a Gentile."

"Nay," replied Marduk, "I would not rebuke your people. They have each only one riding-beast, while I have many. My animals are lightly laden, and we can distribute the burden of one upon the others."

"And, I bethink me, the Scribe will ride upon nothing but an ass," replied Solomon. "He cites the growing infirmities of years as his excuse. I will convey your courteous offer to the rabbi."

"And bid him say to the Scribe," added the Phœnician, "that if he can delay his departure until the crowd has preceded us, my party will gladly bear him company."

(To be continued.)

HOGARTH'S GREATEST WORK.

We are now nearing his greatest work. In April, 1743, he had advertised the forthcoming engravings of the famous "Marriage à-la-Mode," and in the "Battle of the Pictures" he had given a hint of the same series by exhibiting one of them viciously assaulted by a copy of the "Aldobrandini Marriage." His announcement laid stress upon the fact that in these "modern occurrences in high life" care would be taken "that there may not be the least objection to the decency or elegance of the whole work, and that none of the characters represented shall be personal," an assurance which seems to imply that objections on these grounds had been taken to some of his former efforts. The plates, six in number, were issued in April, 1745, the subscription-ticket being the etching called "Characters and Caricatures." In accordance with the artist's promise, they were "engrav'd by the best masters in Paris," G. Scotin executing plates i. and vi., B. Barron plates ii. and iii., and S. E. Ravenet plates iv. and v. Fifty years later (1795-1800) they were again reproduced in mezzotint by B. Earlom. For a description of this excellent social study the reader must go to the commentators; or, better still, to the paintings themselves, which, fortunately, have found a final asylum in the National Gallery. As in the case of the previous series, Hogarth, unwarned by experience, again resorted to an auction after his own fashion, in order to dispose of the original canvases. The bidding was to be by written tickets, and the highest bidder at noon on June 6, 1750, was to be the purchaser. Picture dealers were rigorously excluded. The result of these sagacious arrangements was disastrous, only one bidder, a Mr. Lane, of Hillingdon, near Uxbridge, putting in an appearance. The highest offer having been announced as £120, Mr. Lane made it guineas, at the same time magnanimously offering the artist some hours' delay to find a better purchaser. No one else presented himself, and Mr. Lane became the possessor of the artist's best work and the finest pictorial satire of the century for the modest sum of £126, which included "Carlo Maratti frames" that had cost Hogarth four guineas apiece. It may be added that the plates were described in Hudibrastic verse in 1746; that they prompted Dr. John Shebbeare's novel of "The Marriage Act" in 1754; and that they are credited by the authors with suggesting Colman and Garrick's farce of "The Clandestine Marriage" in 1766. Hogarth also meditated a companion series depicting "A Happy Marriage." But after some tentative essays he abandoned his project, doubtless because the subject presented too little scope for his peculiar qualities.—*The Dictionary of National Biography.*