

Choice Literature.

A KING OF TYRE.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

BY JAMES M. LUDLOW, AUTHOR OF "THE CAPTAIN OF THE JANIZARIES," ETC.

CHAPTER V. — (Continued.)

"I do believe in the priests," said he, "just as I believe in scorpions, and other pests, because they are disagreeable facts. I suppose I ought to be above letting them annoy me, as the people in the country build booths on the roofs of their houses, and go to sleep there, knowing that the scorpions cannot crawl so high. But I cannot sleep if I so much as hear these priestly vermin scratch."

"Do you remember, Zillah, the stories we used to invent as children with Layah's help? They were generally about a king who was driven from his throne, and went wandering over the world, and lost his queen somewhere, and could not find her. You used to call yourself the queen, and imagine all sorts of things you did without—without me; for I was always the king, was I not?"

"And I always found you, too; and now I am going to keep you, and not let you go wandering even in my dreams," replied the fair girl, throwing her arm fondly about the shoulder of Hiram, with her cheek against his. "Even Astarte does not have so good a hold on Tammuz, or, as the Greeks call him, Adonis, when she has found him come to life again as I have on my Adonai—my lord."

Her lustrous eyes, as she gazed into his, seemed to drink love from his heart.

"Ah, but Astarte has to lose her Adonis first, and her maidens go mourning for him. So you might lose me. The Persian king has but to say a word and I must leave my throne. The satrap of Syria—only a satrap—has more power than I, a king, and could depose me. These priests could poison the minds of Artaxerxes; or they could poison me. Do you not regret having promised to be my queen?"

The girl rose from the divan. She straightened her form to its full height. Her pose was majesty itself. Her black eyes flashed with indignant pride:—

"Not even a king shall question either my love or my courage."

Hiram, though startled, was not offended at this sudden transformation. He had been frequently treated to novel exhibitions of her character; but each one increased his admiration for her. She was to him a garden of graces. At every turn in their intimacy some new beauty was revealed, or some new sweetness exhaled from her life to gladden his. He did not, however, expect to find in his garden a stately palm-tree—a character so lofty and ruggedly strong. He now felt that she was more royal than he, and he could have thrown himself at her feet as a slave. But through all Zillah's severity of countenance there played a softer sentiment, that overtempered him to a different expression of loyalty, and he caught her to his arms with the wrapt exclamation: "A queen, indeed! My queen!"

She pushed him gently from her, and looked deeply into his eyes as if she would dry up the very fountain of his soul, as the sun-god dries the springs in summer, should he dare to question again the supremacy of her love. She then took his face between her hands, as she said:—

"I shall be Hiram's queen if he reigns only in a round boat, a pauper pirate of the sea, or carries his crown on a camel flying across the deserts. But"—her voice trembled, steadied only when his hot kiss had acted as a tonic—"I would rather be simply Hiram's wife. Wife means more than queen, does it not?"

The superb woman again became a girl; the palm-tree became a spray of delicate vine that twined itself through and through Hiram's heart.

The long and silent embrace that followed was disturbed by loud talking in the apartment of Ahimelek, which was across the recess entering from the court, a sort of hallway that divided the business offices of the merchant from the portion of the house that was devoted to domestic use.

"Ah! I know that screech," said Hiram. "It belongs to the night-hawk Egbalus. He is always flitting about in the dark. Listen! What nest is he putting his beak into now?"

The priest was evidently threatening and entreating by turns. Ahimelek was as clearly on guard, like some fencer who knows the superior prowess of his antagonist. His tones of voice showed that he was now objecting, and now yielding point after point, only protecting his retreat. Whole sentences were at length caught by the listeners, as the excitement of the priest betrayed his caution:—

"But, sire, you cannot prevent it. I have obtained the consent of every other member of the council but yourself. No man can withstand the will of Baal."

"Ah!" whispered Hiram to Zillah. "Your father, then, did not vote for the sacrifice. I half thought as much. He has always assented to my view that we are making too much of religion. If they would only leave me to select the victims I would order the sacrifice myself, and roast a score or two of priests' spawn. I would make such a feast that Moloch would be sick from surfeit for a hundred years. But listen!"

Egbalus was now fairly hissing his words: "You dare not refuse. It is ruin to you and to your house. Hark you, Ahimelek! Your dealing with the Egyptian is known. You accepted a bribe of 10,000 darics to abandon the commerce of Cyprus and Memphis to the sailors of the Nile. This is death by the laws of Tyre. And think not that having a son for king will save a traitor. The evidence of it is written out. It is on this parchment. A horseman stands ready to carry the news to the Great King at Susa. It was treason against Persia. You know the end. Sign this order of the priests of Baal, and I will tear up this damning document. If not!"

The two listeners looked at each other with consternation. They knew that the priests had spun some web about the merchant. True or false, their accusation would ruin him. Hiram's first impulse was to enter the room, and slay the priest as he stood. A second thought showed the unwisdom of such a course. The plot must have other meshes, though

Egbalus held the chief string. A rash deed on the king's part would precipitate an issue between the throne and the temple, with the advantage in favour of the latter, since their plotting had been of long continuance, and their purposes were well ripened.

"I shall advise your father to yield the point," said Hiram rising. "A few miserable babies more or less for a sacrifice, what does it signify?"

He strode across the open space, and, unannounced, stood before the men. His sudden appearance transformed the debate into a tableau. Egbalus was standing rigidly erect, his hand clenched and raised above his head; his whole soul seemingly condensed into one act of will, dominating the soul of Ahimelek; and that will was blazing from the priest's half-demoniacal eyes. Had he uttered no words, the very pantomime would have been enough to crush a weaker man's resolution. Ahimelek sat limp and pale with terror before the priest.

Without awaiting an explanation, Hiram determined to rescue the merchant from the straits into which his loyalty had apparently put him, and said:—

"Enough of this quarrel! Ahimelek, you have your king's permission to assent. Let the priests have what sacrifice they will."

"Your majesty! Your majesty is mad!" jerked out Ahimelek, holding up his hands in agonizing remonstrance.

"It is enough! I have said it," responded the king.

Egbalus was surprised, and stared as one confounded. But only for a moment did he lose his self-possession. He was a consummate actor. He could direct his most fiery passion by cold discretion, as the moulder leads the molten metal into his patterns of sand. A look of holy serenity suddenly diffused his countenance.

"Baal, I thank thee! Thou hast owned thy servant! Said I not so—that the heart of the king would be so led by Baal that he himself would consent? Most noble king! Servant of the gods! Let me kiss the feet of him whom Baal receives as his son!"

He threw himself upon the floor before the king, who could scarcely restrain an impulse to trample the hypocritical wretch with his heels. It cost Hiram a mighty effort to obey his quick, intuitive discretion. He did not even glance at the prostrate priest, but, with a look of scorn and pity upon Ahimelek, he withdrew.

"Oh, for the power of a king!" he exclaimed, as he re-entered Zillah's apartment. "I swear by all the gods that for the last time have I yielded to the cruelty of these priests. To Sheol with the whole brood of them."

Hiram sank upon the divan by the side of Zillah, exhausted by the sharp conflict of emotions through which he had passed. He rebuked himself for the display of passion.

"But for your sake, my fair one, and the sake of your father, I would have died rather than have done it. But my time will come, if there be any power of justice back of these villainous gods who demand such things."

"I see," said Zillah, putting her hand upon his brow, as if to exorcise some demon there—"I see that you, too, could be cruel, dear Hiram."

"Yes, cruel as any other human beast, until I can abolish cruelty. And I will abolish it—abolish it by the sword."

He sat a long time in silent thought, then rose suddenly, exclaiming:—

"But these are no scenes for you, my darling."

"Why not for me, if for you?" rejoined Zillah. "I am not a butterfly, that must needs flit only in the sunshine. I would rather be like our heroic Queen Dido, for all her troubles, than be a mere statue come to life, like that which her brother, our King Pygmalion, made. Your cares shall be mine, or I am not worthy to sit under the purple canopy of your throne."

"Right royally spoken!" cried Hiram, in an outburst of admiration. "But, for all that, I shall save you from such scenes and such priests, for I shall decree that there shall be no gods—except that every man shall have his own Astarte, and she shall be worshipped thus—" He laid his ardent offering upon her lips.

CHAPTER VI.

An unusual throng filled the streets and the Great Square when the king returned from the house of Ahimelek to his own palace. Priests were everywhere. It seemed as if the ecclesiastical hives of half the cities of Phœnicia had swarmed along the coast, and lit again on the rock of Tyre. Some of these priests, with unkempt hair and mad eyes, were haranguing the crowd; others were engaged in excited debate among themselves. The palanquin of the king moved among the people as if it were the ark of some strange religion; for, while a few glanced at it with respect, many regarded it with rage, and scarcely restrained the impulse to lay violent hands upon it. Egbalus and his devotees had evidently done effective work, not only in disseminating their own venomous spirit, but in organizing their various guilds for action in emergency. The royal attendants noticed that a band of priests moved just ahead of them, and that another band came behind, as if the king's person were either honourably escorted or dangerously menaced. Still another company of priests moved hastily, yet in order, away from the palace gate as the king approached it.

Hiram was himself too much engrossed with his own thoughts fully to take in what was transpiring beyond the closely-drawn curtains of his carriage. But, having passed within his own gate, he suddenly awoke to a sense of some unusual environment that was being spun about him. Entering his private apartment, he was possessed by that mysterious power of clairvoyance through which one is made conscious of a presence that is neither seen nor heard. He was impressed with the fact that the room already contained an occupant. The instinct of danger, reinforced by an acquired habit of vigilance, led him to place his back against the wall, and his hand upon his dagger hilt. Uncertain of the loyalty of even the private servants of his chamber, he determined to face the unknown menace alone. He dismissed all his attendants, and closed the door behind them as they made their exit. Prepared to strike at any living thing that had dared to invade his privacy, he stood a moment listening, and searching with his eyes every object which the thick screen of the hanging lamp left in the shadows.

"Who goes there?" was his challenge.

A whisper came from beyond the curtains that shielded one end of the divan:—

"It is I, King Hiram."

"Why, Hanno! what means this? Are you mad? Is everybody mad?"

The low tones of his friend's voice bespoke continued caution. Hanno laid his hand upon the king's arm as he said: "Let us first make sure that we are alone. If I could steal a glance here, others might."

He raised the shade from the flaming wick that floated in the oil. With drawn weapons the two men searched every nook where there was possibility of concealment. They were alone.

"You are in danger, my king. I anticipated no harm to you in the open streets, for the priests are interested in protecting you there; but I feared lest some of the devils might give you foul play here; so I crept in, no matter how. You know the plot? No? It was further along than I suspected when we parted this afternoon. You, Hiram! Oh, the treachery of it! the cowardice of it! You, my king!"

Hanno's voice was choked with uncontrollable rage. "You—you are to be the sacrifice to Baal."

Hiram stood gazing stupidly into his friend's face. He heard his words. He understood them, and yet he could not take them in. The power of thought seemed paralyzed. Then, gradually, he came to realize the meaning of what he had heard. At first he thought only of the indignity offered his throne. Then, brave as he was, there came a tremor of dread, as the horrid rites of the sacrifice filled his imagination. That cruelty which he had refused to sanction, where the victim was the humblest babe among his people was to come upon himself! He saw himself a bound and helpless victim. He felt the flames, but they chilled him to the heart's core. For the first time in his life he was afraid.

The two men sat down together upon the edge of the divan. For a long time neither spoke. Nor was it necessary. Rapidly the king put together in his memory many recent occurrences. His keen judgment saw their significance, and that they focused in the terrible fact which Hanno had announced.

"Blind! blind! blind I have been; but I see it now," groaned the stricken man. Then, starting from his horrible reverie, he strode across the apartment. Pausing under the full glare of the lamp, he held aloft his dagger:—

"I swear before Baal that if he demands the sacrifice of the King of Tyre, the King of Tyre shall be both priest and victim! My own hand shall strike the blow; not theirs. And the altar shall be the dead body of Egbalus. He first shall fall. I shall seek him."

He moved towards the door. His friend stayed him.

"You cannot go out. The house is closely guarded," said Hanno. "Egbalus has filled the city with bands of Galli. They have been coming into Tyre from the country around for days."

"I will cut my way through a thousand of them to the dock, and take to the sea," cried the king, in the valour of his despair.

"It is too late," replied Hanno. "When I heard the decision of the priests this afternoon I tried to arrange for that; but your biremes have all been scuttled, and mine is stolen away. The very captains in the harbour have been bedevilled by the priests. Brave fellows though they are, like all sailors, they are superstitious, and believe that Baal has put a curse on every wave for any one who would attempt your rescue."

"Then, my dear Hanno, you too must go and leave me to my fate. I will not have my life if it endangers yours. Go! Appear as my enemy! Save yourself! I will know that your heart is true, even if your hand should tie the cords and cast me into the flames. Go!"

"Never!" cried Hanno. "Did not you and I see the flames when forty thousand Sidonians burned their houses over their heads and perished together, rather than fall into the hands of the Persians?"

"Then let it be so, Hanno! And right here we will emulate them. See, this flame to this curtain, and this couch shall be our altar!"

As the king spoke, he reached the lamp from its hanging, and brought it close to the heavy draperies.

"Hold!" cried Hanno. "This is no time for madness, but for cool heads. The sacrifice cannot be for some days yet. Time breeds opportunities. Let us watch!"

"For what?" cried the king, burying his head in his hands.

Nearly an hour passed in silence, broken at length by Hanno:—

"Egbalus has made a prediction that, so powerful is the will of Baal, the god will send the spirit of holy zeal into every heart in Tyre; that the very rays of the sun-god to-morrow will inspire all they fall upon with such acquiescence that every one would gladly take the place of the sacrifice. As I came in here, only a moment before you, a herald was running across the square, crying: 'The king consents! The king consents! Praise be Baal!' The lying devil of a priest has already perjured his soul with 'at counterfeit of the royal word.'"

"Ay, I did consent."

Hiram then related to Hanno the scene at the house of Ahimelek, where, under misapprehension of its full import, he had approved the sacrificial celebration.

"It is well, then," said Hanno. "Why not seem to verify the high priest's interpretation of your assent? Apparently yield. It will divert suspicion from any plan we might adopt."

The young men talked through the entire night, and in the early dawn Captain Hanno, disguised as a market vendor, was let out the great gate with a good volley of curses from old Goliab, the porter.

CHAPTER VII.

The ensuing day was one of intense excitement in Tyre. At every open space, on the walls, in the Great Square, at street corners, and especially in the court of the temple, were priests haranguing the people. Bands of Galli, the priests of Astarte, having set an image of the goddess upon an ass, swarmed about it as it was drawn through the streets beating drums, blowing horns, cutting themselves with knives, tearing out handfuls of their hair and chanting—or rather howling—the sentences of their wildest liturgy. Caught by the strange infection, many private citizens openly renounced their secular vocations, and joined the priesthood of Astarte.

Initiation into this order, according to an ancient custom, was signalled by the candidate's breaking into a neigh-