

Choice Literature.

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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 XXV.

Two hours' ride south of the Phœnician city of Gebal, which the Greeks called Byblus, the river Adonis pours into the sea the water it has gathered from the melting snows and living springs of the Lebanon. Every year the banks of the stream were thronged with multitudes that swarmed out from Tyre and Sidon, Byblus and Sarepta, and all the fishing hamlets and farm villages from Aradus to Joppa. These people were pilgrims to Apheca, the source of the sacred river Adonis.

It was the month of Tammuz, when summer bursts with fecund life upon the land of Syria. The change of the season was thought of by the Syrians under the pleasing myth of Astarte and Tammuz; or, as the Greeks told the story, of Venus and Adonis. When summer yielded to winter, stark and sterile, this was Tammuz, in his strength and beauty, slain by the wild boar. The returning spring-time was the resurrection of the fair divinity under the embraces of the yearning goddess. The water of the river, reddened by the earth that mingled with it, as the melting snows from the Lebanon overflowed the channel of the stream, was it not Tammuz's blood?

Several months had elapsed since the events heretofore related. The ruddy tide of Adonis River had already sent out its annual invitation for the festival. The report had been duly repeated that the star, which was none other than Astarte herself, had been seen to pass over Lebanon and fall into the pool of Apheca, the fountain-head of the river.

The joy of Astarte and Tammuz, now restored to each other's arms, was especially honoured by love-making between the sexes. The innocent play of sentiment among the simple-minded people would naturally have degenerated into grossness, even had there not been prescribed the sacrifice of maidenly modesty upon the altar of Astarte, as a preliminary to legitimate marriage. The renown of the festival of the Syrian goddess drew not only worshippers, but the curious and the vile, from all parts of the world, as insects are attracted by light and by foulness.

The banks of the river Adonis were adorned at places with the memorial tombs of the god, wrought not only with the highest Phœnician art, but in many cases with the touch of the more delicate chisel of the Greek. Interspersed among these permanent ornaments of the sylvan stream were the tents of the pilgrims, whose rich canvas and streamers contrasted gayly with the sombre rocks of the deep ravines and the dense shadows of the over-hanging trees. These tents the wealthier folk pitched for their noontide rest or for the night, as they journeyed leisurely towards the river's fount.

A pavilion larger than all others, and which excited the gaping gossip of the passers-by, was that of the household of Ahimelek of Tyre. Indeed, next to the marvels of the goddess herself, the visit of Zillah was the chief notoriety of the season at Apheca. She was to engage in the ceremonial which not only marked her entrance upon womanhood, but which was to be especially preliminary to her marriage with Rubaal, the presumptive king. By ancient custom the queen of Tyre was also ordained a priestess of Astarte. The splendid rites of Zillah's institution as such were to follow the less seemly ones. This would have drawn to her tent the curiosity of all, even if the tent had not concealed the person of one who had been the affianced of King Hiram, whose translation to the estate of the gods surely omened some miraculous blessing upon her who would have been his queen and bride.

The priests of Melkarth had joined with those of Astarte in fanning the popular interest in Zillah's investiture, as it was understood that the greater part of Ahimelek's dower would go into their coffers; for Rubaal, her prospective husband, was but the priesthood crowned in the person of its tool.

To Layah, the handmaiden of Zillah, the strange taking-off of the king, whatever it meant, was the profoundest disappointment of her life. She had thought so long of him as her young lord, had served him with such devotion when she served her young mistress, that she had now no object in life but to join with Zillah in her mourning, or to comfort her as a mother would comfort her broken-hearted child. From the marriage of Zillah with Rubaal she shrank, and would have detested it even if her mistress had been able to put off her old love for the new.

"To-morrow, Layah, is the day. It has come at last."

Zillah raised her face to her companion's. It was very fair; more winsome than ever before. It had been growing in beauty; but of that spiritual sort of beauty that awakens pain together with admiration. Her eyes were deeper set; more lustrous, but with a far-away look, as if the light that kindled them came from beyond the common day. Her face was thinner, its lines harder and sharper. "A typical face for a priestess!" old Egbalus said, as once he saw her. "A sufferer's face!" thought Layah every day, and a hundred times a day, as she saw beneath it the tragic features of her mistress's soul.

"Do you hold to your resolutions, my lady?" Layah asked, her voice trembling, scarcely making the words articulate.

"Yes—at last! at last!"

Layah threw herself on the ground at her mistress's feet. She remained for a while as one in prayer. At length, raising her face, she cried:—

"O my lady! have I influenced you to this decision? Tell me truly, as Astarte lives! as Baal-Hiram lives there in the sky! tell me, truly, have I led you?"

"No, Layah, you have not. It was the covenant I made with him who was Adonis to me, my lord Hiram! my god Hiram, if Baal will! Baal will take us both. Hanno himself, and he is wisest of all the priests, assured me that we should not always be separated. I asked him directly if at the festival of Adonis I might not go to Hiram. He replied that in the lore of the priests such things are said to have oc-

curred, and bade me to be true to Hiram, and watch; and, furthermore, he gave me a sign of the divine will. But I may tell it to no one; not even to my faithful Layah."

"If," said Layah, "I have not persuaded you to the deed, tell me now, before the gods, have I sought to dissuade you?"

"No, my dear Layah, you too have been true to my lord Hiram. You have not hindered me from my holy sacrifice to him."

"May I have my reward, then, from the hand of my mistress?"

"Ask what you will, Layah."

"Let me go with you, if merely human creatures may enter the world of the gods. Perhaps I can serve there. They have slaves there, have they not? The sky has flecks in it. Why may not I be with you? I know that Baal-Hiram will let me come with you."

"No, no!" cried Zillah. "It must not be. If I live after my body is dead—and who can tell?—let me think of you as living here. I will come back often, and bless you; or I will watch over you as the moon gleams upon us. And if I do not live again, let there be one heart in this world to mourn for me. I have none other than thine, my dear Layah. My father does not love me, except for the riches I may bring him. To you I give these. See! This armlet was Hiram's gift. Let me put it on you. This necklace you shall wear. Do not deny me this favour, or I shall believe no one on earth loved me."

The two women remained much of the night weeping, or in grief too deep for tears: Zillah prayerful and resolute, the comforter of her hand-maiden; as if the poor girl's sorrow were for some other misery than that of her consoler.

CHAPTER XXVI.

With the dawn all was astir. From behind rocks and trees the curious stared as Zillah's litter was carried along. At every spot where the path widened, so as to allow them to gather in crowds, many people prostrated themselves as if before a sacred ark. The day was yet young when the denser throngs indicated the immediate vicinity of the holy place. The servants of Ahimelek had gone before Zillah and prepared her pavilion, so that when she stepped veiled from the litter she entered alone the seclusion of her own chamber.

A vast amphitheatre of rocks, rising almost perpendicularly hundreds of feet, abruptly closes the valley of the Adonis. A deep and dark cave opens at the base of this precipice, like some ominous portal of Sheol itself. From its black jaws issues the torrent, hailing its first glimpse of the light with wild roar, like that of some beast startled in its den by the flash of the hunter's torch. Tossing high its mane of spray, it leaps wildly down from ledge to ledge, until it stretches itself for its long race through the deep ravine below. Its course is lined with trees—gigantic oaks, their limbs gnarled and torn, like those of veteran gladiators, by conflict with the storms of centuries; tall pines whose lofty tufts at noonday throw shadows, like patches of night, into the gorge below. Nature here seems to resent the intrusion of men, and drops a sense of solitude among the noisy crowds, or lifts them in spite of their revelry to an awe of her own vast mysteries. It is a spot where men, if they have no genuine revelations, are tempted to invent gods; to shape them into phantasies of overwrought imagination, and clothe them in the shadowy habits of their fears.

Close beside the Fountain of Adonis rose the Temple of Astarte. In front was a quadrangular court, in the open portion of which the throngs of votaries walked, and beneath whose cloistered sides they rested in extravagant ease and sanctioned vice. In the centre of the court stood the great conical stone, the symbol of deity, on the top of which, twice a year, a chosen priest sat and presented to the divinity the prayers of those who sent their petitions up to him winged with sufficient gifts to warrant their flight to the goddess. White doves flitted through the air, perched upon the projecting stone-work of the porticos, and flocked on the marble pavement regardless of the convenience of human beings, whose superstition made reverent space for the birds which Astarte had chosen to be her favourite symbol. The cooing of the doves, intermingled with the softest notes of flutes floating lasciviously from hidden places, melted into the murmur of the stream. The natural perfume of plants and flowers was supplemented by the incense of rarest spices, which loaded the atmosphere with the illusion of some other world beyond the shores of Araby the Blest.

Back of the great court an ascent of steps led to the temple. Folding gates of bronze guarded the sacred precincts from unhalloved intrusion. Gilded beams held aloft the roof of cedar, carved with grotesque symbols.

The statue of the goddess stood colossal in size and exquisite in form and decoration. In her right hand she held the sceptre, in her left the distaff; for, while she swayed the hearts of women, she was at the same time the patroness and rewarder of their domestic industry. On her head was a tower of gold, whose gleaming spikes well imitated the rays of the sun by day. But at night her peculiar glory was revealed. Then the sacred stone that was set in her crown glowed with mysterious light, and filled the temple with soft rays as of the moon. The central gleam from the stone followed the beholder as an eye, shooting the beam from the omniscience of the goddess into the very soul of the devotee. A statue of Baal sometimes floated in the air, and invited the questions of worshippers, to which it gave oracular response by swaying forward if the answer were affirmative, and backward if a request were refused.

There were varieties of worship adapted to the caprice of all comers. Some bent over the pool, where the torrent, issuing from the cave and plunging from the ledge, makes its first halting-place. Into the swirling waters they cast jewels and gems. If these sank to the bottom, they were presumed to have been accepted by the divinity; if they were cast up by the swift and turbulent eddies, the worshipper retired without assurance of favour. Perhaps the devotee did not confess to himself the selfishness of his motive for making his offering of goodly weight; nor did the priests confess to the people the motive with which every night they dragged the pool and took up the sunken basins they had placed in the bottom.

In the temple court were daily hung some golden caskets containing the hair and beards of young men, their first manly offering to the goddess, whose favours they entreated with the fair sex; and other caskets or bags of golden thread held the similar offerings of the maidens.

A less attractive sight was that of one who had sacrificed a sheep, and while its skin was still warm with life, placed its head upon his own, tied its forelegs about his neck, the greasy inside against his face, and, doubling his body so that he could kneel upon the lower part of the skin, prayed to the Sheep-goddess—one of the appellations of the Queen of Heaven.

The most imposing offering was that of the Fire Night, the preparation for which occupied many days. A large area in front of the temple court was filled with standing trees which had been cut from the sides of Lebanon, and made an artificial grove. The offerings of devotees were hung among the branches—rich jewels, and the handiwork ornaments of the poorer class; garments of priceless stuffs, and the discarded only raiment of some pauper; birds of all plumage, some in cages of bronze or carved alabaster, some tied by strings to the trees; wild animals, the captive pets of the hunter; sheep, and at times living bulls, swung in girdles from the stancher branches of the trees. The combustible nature of the wood was augmented by smearings of resinous matter gathered in great quantities in the forest.

After the images of the gods had been carried about the grove, at a given signal torches were applied at many places simultaneously. Then there burst through the night a spectacle of wildest magnificence. The spark sprites sprang rapidly from the lower to the topmost limbs of each tree; then roofed the intervals with arches of fire; then flung far and high over all a hundred sheets of flame, banners and streamers that signalled the event to the very sky. The intense heat so rarefied the air that, though scarce a leaf quivered on Lebanon, a mighty wind was created, which swayed the forest around, whose roar answered back the roar of the burning timber. This was not unreasonably interpreted by ignorant people to be the response of nature to the honour paid to its queen.

The day on which Zillah reached the shades of Apheca was the one devoted to mourning for Tammuz. The box containing the image of the god had been borne on the shoulders of six priestesses of Astarte, followed by a procession of maidens with dishevelled hair and torn garments, who threw handfuls of ashes into the air, and filled the grove with their wailing for the brief widowhood of their goddess. At nightfall the coffin was buried. As at the time of real death the lights are extinguished in the house, so now every tent was darkened. Only sounds of lamentation floated through the ravine and among the sacred trees, prompted at brief intervals by the lugubrious wailing of a trumpet blown in the temple precincts.

With the first blush of the new day all was changed; hilarity took the place of mourning. The woods rang with shouts and song and merry laughter. The image of the god was exhumed, and carried in the arms of dancing women to the temple. On this day maidens, hoping to be married before the year elapsed, gave their hair in offering to Astarte; or their persons to be embraced by strangers. The latter was the more sacred service, the performance of which could not be omitted in the case of one highly born or ambitious of entering the aristocratic circles of matronhood. The women entered the booths prepared. With locks entwined into the conventional sacred node, arrayed in elegance rivaling that of the bridal raiment they hoped to wear, glittering with the gems that betokened their dowry, they sat and waited for the rite.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Layah was fully persuaded of the determination of her mistress to destroy herself, and, notwithstanding Zillah's commands to the contrary, was resolved to imitate her heroic example. This purpose was strengthened by her fears of Rubaal's vengeance upon her in the event of Zillah's suicide. Her handmaiden would be suspected of collusion with the unhappy lady, and certainly be charged with a criminal neglect in allowing such a deed. Her penalty would be death, unless Rubaal and the priests invented for her something worse—sale for the ship-harem of some rude sea-captain, transportation to the tin-mines of the Cassiterides, or physical torture in some prison. In contrast with such possibilities, her mind became fascinated with the idea of standing erect, raising her arm adorned with the wristlet which her mistress had given her, striking the sharp blade into her breast just beneath the heavy pendants of the necklace that Zillah had worn, and falling dead by her side—a brave self-sacrifice to her love for her mistress and her fidelity to the royal house of Tyre.

The two women went together to the shambles of Astarte, both closely covered with the long veil, which concealed their faces and forms. No word passed between them, except Zillah's repetition of the oft-said vow: "The dagger before the stranger!"

At the shambles they stood a moment in endearing embrace, then silently separated. Zillah entered the booth designated by the insignia of the house of Ahimelek. Layah entered another adjacent, which communicated with that of her mistress; an arrangement which allowed the toilet service of a maid without apparent intrusion.

The day passed. The general reverence for the person of the betrothed of the now deified Hiram, together with the awe that was felt for the person of one who was to be a priestess of Astarte, restrained the most wanton from approaching Zillah's retreat.

Night shadows had already climbed the precipitous sides of the valley, crowding the sunlight before them, until the day gleamed only in the tops of the tall pines that fringed the crest and seemed to mingle with the sky.

The priests had noted the immunity of Zillah's apartment; that no one had approached it. They were concerned about the issue. A group of several strangers had been observed during most of the day sauntering about the temple court. These were approached by the priests, who evidently offered them money to assist in the accomplishment of the rite. After a few moments of apparent entreaty with them one of their number said, "I will go"; and, stepping from the group, walked to the apartment.

"Handsome enough for Adonis himself!" observed a priest.

"How the eyes of Rubaal would turn green to see him!" rejoined another.

"He looks like a Jew," said a third.

"That cannot be," replied the first speaker, "or he would have bargained with us for a heavier price upon his service."

The strange man approached the curtain of the apartment and hesitatingly drew it aside.