

Choice Literature.

A KING OF TYRE.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

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CHAPTER IV.

The Temple of Melkarth, the impersonage of Baal as that god was supposed to preside over the interests of Tyre, stood near the centre of the city. It was imposing, not so much because of its architectural lines, as for the enormous stones which made its foundation, each one of which was believed to have been laid in human blood some time in remote ages past. The space in front of the temple was a miniature paradise. Tiny rills, supplied artificially from the great aqueduct on the mainland, trickled over bright pebbles, and through the green grass fountains splashed in their basins of porphyry, marble, and bronze. Gay plumed birds from distant countries, wing-clipped, that they might not fly away, perched in delusive freedom upon the trees, and, with their various songs, replied to the challenge of lyre and flute that floated from the recesses of the temple court.

But on the afternoon of the day whose events we have been narrating, a vast multitude of people filled the little park, and drowned these sweeter sounds in the clatter of their voices. The streets leading to the temple were crowded with those who had leisure from labour to indulge their curiosity. An unusual number of people thronged through the great gates of the temple to make offerings upon the altars. The simple heralding of religious revival is often the surest provocative of its coming. Thus it happened that the order of the council, respecting some stupendous rite that should be performed, awakened a popular impulse for pietistic devotion.

The full coterie of temple officials was in attendance. There were barbers who shaved the beards and clipped the long forelocks of the worshippers, by offering which to the god they signalled their entrance upon the virile state of manhood. There were venders of victims for sacrifice, and votive objects of every variety; custodians of veils and sacred furniture, priests to slay the animals, and others to supply the sacred coals to any who would burn incense.

The devotees jostled one another in their eagerness to read and take down upon their little tablets the exact tariff fixed by the temple code for the services of priests, and prices of objects acceptable to the god, as these were placarded upon the walls. Some were busy admiring the memorial slabs or statuettes which had been presented by wealthy Tyrians, and were often likenesses of the donors, erected in reverent attempt to keep the divinity and their fellow-citizens perpetually reminded of their pious munificence. A gaping group gazed at the two columns, one of gold, the other of emerald, which gave a mysterious light at night, and which stood, one at the end of each of the two aisles of the temple flanking the central nave. These had been procured at vast expense at some time of great deliverance, and were inscribed: "To the Lord Melkarth, Master of Tyre: The offering of thy servants, because he has listened to their voice. May he still bless us!"

Beyond these a crowd surveyed the altar of bronze, beaten by skilful hands into delicate flower-work, from the centre of which rose the perpetual flame in commemoration of the adventure of the goddess Astarte, who once caught a shooting-star, and enshrined it among her favourite Tyrians; or, as some of the priests said, to express the faith of the people in the divinity of fire, which was the materialized brightness of the face of Baal, the sun-god. A group stood near the great gateway, watching an opportunity to steal a glance between the swaying curtains, which screened the inner court from common eyes.

The most sacred precinct of the temple was an artificial lake. From the midst of the water rose a single stone, perhaps ten cubits high, on the top of which was the Maabed, or ark, enclosing a statue of the god, together with some objects sacred in the history of Tyre, and believed, therefore, to be the special delight of its divine protector.

The platform around the little lake was paved with variegated marbles, white, yellow, red, brown and rose colour, which were wrought into graceful patterns of mosaic work. A roof, blazoned with tiles of gold, sheltered the platform from rain and sun, and made it the rendezvous of the priests.

Just as the sun was going down a group of priests gathered about Egbalus in close consultation. They were dressed in white chitons, which clung close to their forms, except for the fine fluting of the skirts. Scarfs of violet ran over their shoulders and across their bodies diagonally. Their feet were bare; their heads shaved, and protected by close-fitting skull-caps, in some cases of gorgeous colour, in others of knitted hair-work, which mingled confusedly with the black beards of the younger, and contrasted finely with the white beards of the more venerable.

Egbalus was speaking. "The council has but begun the reform which is to restore Tyre to its pre-eminence. It has decreed the sacrifice. It has prescribed that the offerings shall be worthy and notable. But what sacrifices shall be offered is not for the council to determine. This, only we who are admitted to the secret council of the gods themselves—we, the sacred order of priests—can declare. And woe to him who, in this day of honour to Baal, shall thwart the will of his priests!"

"Woe! woe unto him!" echoed around the circle. The high priest continued his harangue. "In the ancient days of Tyrian glory, when there was no power on land or sea to dispute our sway or rival our commerce; when ships returning from their voyages hung anchors of solid silver from their prows, having room only for more precious merchandise within—then Tyre gave great abundance to Baal-Melkarth, and offered its most distinguished citizens upon the altar. But how long, O Baal of Tyre! since thou hast had a princely offering? What are gems and beasts to the god who is offended with men? What are the babes which poverty gives because it cannot feed them, when kings have insulted the majesty of Heaven? And what—"

The old priest had either wrought himself up to a divine frenzy, or superbly acted the part of one who was supposed

to be "filled with the god." His countenance became livid and white by turns. The great blue veins were swollen at his temples. His face seemed to expand. His neck thickened. His eyes fixedly glared towards a patch of sunlight that gleamed on the top of the wall. His form was rigid, except for a convulsive twitching of the fingers.

The attendant priests crowded close to their leader, and stared into his eyes, as if to catch the gleam of some coming revelation. The old priest's lips moved, but at first without articulation. He raised his hand, and, with unbent arm, pointed to the glint of sunshine, which seemed to hold him by some fatal fascination. At length his words became audible, very slowly uttered, and with oracular hoarseness:—

"Baal permits me to know his will. Yonder light is no more surely from the sun-god than is a light that burns within me."

A slight zephyr at this moment ruffled the surface of the sacred water.

"It is the breath of Baal!" said one.

"See! See! The Maabed itself shook! It is the sign of the god! A miracle! A miracle!"

"A miracle!" they murmured, and prostrated themselves, crying, "O Baal, hear us! O Baal, guide us!"

Egbalus had remained standing, in unchanged attitude, watching the sunlight. He now whispered, impressing into his tones the simulation of awe:—

"I see a mighty altar. On it lies one enrobed as a king. By it stands, august and venerable, a kingly priest, and—

slays the victim. But hark! a voice! It is that of Melkarth himself, who bids me remember how, in our sacred traditions, it is recorded that the mighty god El, when a dire calamity had come upon his favourite city of Gebal, took his own son, adorned him in the robes of royalty, carried him to the altar, slew him, and so brought blessings for ages upon his people. Hear, O ye priests of Baal!"

He lowered his voice, either through sense of the awful solemnity of what he was about to utter, or fear of being overheard by others than those whom he owned, body and soul, as he did his infatuated band of priests. His followers arose from their prostrate positions, and drew close to him. This they heard: "Tyre must offer to Baal its king!"

A deep hush followed. Egbalus glanced nervously from one to another. Had he mistaken his men?

"The king?" said one, in a tone that might have been regarded as either assent or surprised interrogation.

"We have another king," was Egbalus' quick and altogether unghostly response.

"Baal save us!" cried one.

"The will of Baal be done!" was the sharp rejoinder of another—Maitan, a man of ferocious severity of countenance, whose body showed more scars from self-inflicted wounds than could be counted in half the circle besides.

Egbalus suddenly dropped all his mysteriousness of manner, with keen eyes searched their faces, by his very look challenging each one to dare resistance. He was now less high priest than he was politician and leader; seemingly forgetting his spiritual, he asserted his secular, power. Satisfied with what he saw in the half-cowed superstition or the crafty ambition of his followers, he boldly declared:—

"It must be. Woe to the priest who, at this crisis of our order, dares to betray it!"

He drew his long knife, such as was used in sacrificing—

"This for the heart of the first faithless priest!"

"And this!"

"And this!"

Half a score of gleaming blades were raised.

Egbalus continued: "King Hiram believes not in the gods; would destroy them, and us with them. Rubaal must be king. It is the will of Baal, and it is the wisdom of men."

He allowed a silence to follow, that his suggestion might work. He did not for an instant, however, cease his search for any dissenting look upon a single face. He was correct in his judgment of them, and now knew that when the critical moment came there was not a man but would assault the king in any way that he commanded. Indeed, he had, during the few months he had held the high priest's office, gathered about himself, in the inner circle of priests who shared his counsels, only those who were desperate in religious bigotry, or who were known to have some secret hatred towards the king.

"Let the god answer through our breasts!" at length he said, resuming his pietistic tone.

The priests bowed their heads until they touched the pavement. They then resumed a sitting posture, each with his eyes fixed upon his breast, as if listening to his own heart beats for the articulation of the will of the god who possessed him.

"Baal speaks!" muttered one.

"He speaks!"

"He speaks!" was echoed from the circle.

"Baal has spoken through the lips of his high priest," said Maitan, rising.

One by one the others rose, and repeated, "Baal has spoken through the lips of his high priest. So let it be! and dies the man who says not so!"

The sunlight had left the temple wall. Dark shadows dropped upon the corridors about the sacred lake, and in the gathering night the cabal of priests broke up.

CHAPTER V.

Was it the night darkness that, by its contrast with his bright dream of Zillah, awoke Hiram? However that may have been, he aroused himself with the purpose of making his vision as near as possible a waking reality. He would go to her. Her hand upon his brow always exorcised his evil spirits, and he knew a pillow for a restless head softer than that of his divan. He struck with his finger a disk of bronze that hung by the couch. A deep, but exceedingly soft and sweet, note floated through the apartment, and was instantly answered by the keeper of the royal wardrobe. This honest fellow's loyalty was limited by the conviction that the king should be the handsomest man in his realm, and he spared no pains to make him such. Though he was not officially barber to his majesty, he yet wrought upon the short curls on his master's head with the exquisite care that a jeweller's etcher might have bestowed upon the locks of a goddess he was transferring from his imagination to a golden plate or goblet. The king was, ordinarily, far from fastidious regarding his raiment, and had often flung off the royal gewgaws in which his attendants arrayed him for state display. The same indifference to appearance at times led him to the

opposite extreme; as, on the day we are narrating, he had worn the dress with which he had presided at the council, also on the ship and amid the dirt of the foundries and workshops. But upon certain occasions he was not averse to the consideration of a goodly appearance, especially when he made his visits to Zillah. The male bird will display his plumage to the utmost, and pipe his sweetest notes, in the presence of the female. We may leave the explanation of this to the naturalist and the novelist; we here only record the fact that Hiram made no objection when his attendant brought from the wardrobe a close-fitting tunic of Sindonese silk, the raw material of which, brought from far-away India, had been woven without a flaw on the Tyrian looms, and embroidered by skilful and patient fingers with scarabs, lotus-blossoms, winged globes, and royal urai, in a combination of lines and colours that fascinated the eye with its general effect as much as it bewildered by its details. About his neck he suffered three collars to be placed; the upper one closely fitting his throat, while the lower one hung far down upon his breast; all sparkling with tiny gems. He girded his loins with a scarf of radiant colours, in the knot of which shone a huge diamond, like a star in the belt of Orion. His sandals were fastened with ribbons made of threads of gold, and wound in cross-lines above his ankles, thus setting off as fine a calf as ever kept time to the music of the dance. Could Hiram have seen himself in the glass with his own eyes instead of through the imagined eyes of his mistress, he would have blushed for his effeminate bravery, and preferred to don the tight leathern uniform of a common soldier. But, to make his victorious entrance into a maiden's heart, he really thought himself arrayed in heroic style.

The house of Ahimelek was near the eastern wall, in the highest part of the city. From the east side it looked directly down upon the two harbours, and across the narrow strait that divided the island from the mainland. From its western balconies the view lay over the city, and far out over the Great Sea. The proud old merchant delighted especially in this prospect, which on every hand reminded him of the sources of his wealth. Far away towards Cyprus he could sight the incoming vessels, and towards Lebanon detect the slow-moving specks that were his caravans.

The house was of cedar. Its beam-heads and cornices were carved with objects beautiful or grotesque, as pleased the fancy of the architect; for Ahimelek had no standard by which to estimate its excellence beyond its expense. Its projecting windows were closely screened, one with a lattice-work of bronze, another of porphyry, another of alabaster, and one with strips of agate closely cemented. The interior apartments were panelled in richest woods, and floored with elaborate mosaics, upon which were skins of lions, wolves, and leopards. Objects of curiosity which his captains had brought from all the known countries of the world—enormous tusks of elephants, nuggets of precious minerals, diamonds with their incrustation of stone, plumage of strange birds, vases of malachite and lapis-lazuli, the weapons of savages, and bejewelled swords once worn by kings; these filled tables and niches, and stood in the corners.

Ahimelek met the king as the latter alighted from his litter in the central court. It needed no previous suspicion on the part of Hiram to detect something inhospitable in the merchant's welcome. As they passed the entrance together Ahimelek stopped. He seemed to be on the point of speaking, yet no words came. Awkwardly he made way for the young man to precede him; and, as the lover sought the apartment of Zillah, her father stood looking after him with troubled countenance.

His formal and acknowledged betrothal to Zillah, according to Phœnician custom, gave to Hiram every privilege a husband has in his wife, except that of living with her. From the moment he had put the ring upon her finger, and had given her father the legal document conveying certain property pledges, he became her virtual possessor and guardian.

At the entrance to the apartment of his betrothed, Hiram was met by Layah, Zillah's maid, a woman whose matronly manner contradicted the story of her youthful face. Layah had once been the handmaiden of Hiram's mother, and, but a little beyond him in years, had grown up as a sort of official playmate in the nursery. Upon his mother's death he had sent her as a gift to Zillah, who needed such a companion, since she had scarcely known a mother's protection, and, without brothers or sisters, was alone in the care of her father's house.

Layah's pride, when she ushered Hiram into the presence of her mistress, was warranted, for she truly thought there was no more beautiful woman in Tyre than the daughter of Ahimelek. And, indeed, Zillah's radiance this night was refracted in additional lustre through the toilet her maid had given her. A simple band of ribbon, with a single pearl stud-ding it, bound her jet-black hair, but did not confine it. Her locks overflowed in clustering ringlets upon her forehead and temples, and fell in waves upon her white neck. Her features were still, but so clear-cut as to seem larger than in reality, and so animated were they with health and joy that the long, pendent ear-rings of crystal, which rested upon her shoulders, seemed to borrow from her face the light that flashed in them. Her upper garment came close to the throat, and was gathered into a sinus beneath the breast, by a girdle which was knotted in front. Her exposed arms were of such graceful shape that one scarcely noticed the wristlets and armlets with which her maid had insisted on decorating them. Her full-flowing skirt of silk was so artfully looped at the bottom as to reveal a foot and ankle, about which a serpent of silver coiled in loving embrace.

Zillah's first welcome of Hiram was followed by a playful frown. She held him at arm's-length, and curiously inspected his raiment.

"For shame, my Lord Hiram! I believe you have borrowed your cousin Rubaal's clothes—the same he came to woo me in the day before you and I were betrothed. You are more goodly-appearing with your sailor's cap and coarse chiton than in these fashions of Tyre. See! I have discarded my cap of pearls, and would not put on half the jewels Layah wanted me to, because I thought you would like me better as I am."

She dexterously loosed his triple collar, and flung it upon a divan; then plucked the great diamond from his scarf.

"Hold!" cried Hiram. "Do not throw that away. It may buy back our throne, if Egbalus steals it. Let me put it here, where Artaxerxes himself would not dare to pluck it."

He inserted the glowing jewel in the folds of the sinus of her dress.