The Scourge of Damascus

A Story of the East...

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CHAPTER XIX.—(Continued.)

He had taken her hand and was raising it to his lips, but she suddenly drew it from him.

"No! no! no!" she murmured.

"Pardon, lady. I meant no offense." The tone was one of grief.

"Oh, Julian! Julian! Leave me not yet!"

She rested her head upon his arm, and gazed up into his face. Her eyes were streaming with tears and her bosom heaved convulsively.

"Lady, Ulin!"

"Julian! In this hour of helplessness and need I turn to thee with all my trust and faith. If the love of this poor heart is worth the cherishing, take it and keep it always. I have no power. I have no choice. The light of thy face, beaming in love upon me, reveals to me that I am bound to thee by chains which I cannot break."

She rested her head upon his bosom and he, winding his arm about her, pressed her to his heart as a treasure the most precious that earth could bestow.

The sun sank to its evening rest and the shadows of twilight deepened over the valleys and over the grove. The stars came out one by one, like their celestial sisters, and the silver moon, lifting its face across the hills of Hebah, cast its soft light into the cave. Still the lovers sat beneath the orange tree, for the night could have set no sacred seal upon the vows that had been plighted.

When the time came for the lovers to part, Julian was anxious that Ulin should go back with him to the city, but the latter would not hear to it. He was sure that his father would be there, and he was anxious to see him. So it was agreed that Julian should return to the city and bring his father back with him on the morrow. At first Ulin had thought of entreating Omar to go with Julian, and bearing to your father tidings that his daughter was safe and happy; but he was afraid that Omar would not be able to keep a secret from his wife, and he was sure that if Zaphnath should know the whereabouts of her daughter she would be sure to let her husband know it, and then the old man would be down upon his child like a hawk upon a dove. So he had decided that it was best that Julian should be the only one to carry the news to his father.

Ulin had drawn a mantle about her shoulders, and Julian had turned to speak apart with Ben Hadad, when Osmir came rushing into the cave, with terror depicted most painfully upon his ebon features.

"They are coming!" he cried. "They have sprung upon us from a hidden cover!"

"Who are coming?"

"They are the king's soldiers, led by the captain, Benoni!"

On the next instant the clash of arms was heard at the entrance.

"Back, back, good Love!" said Julian, gently pushing the maiden towards her chamber. "There may yet be hope."

He clasped a sword as he spoke and leaped toward the entrance, but he was too late. Already a score of armed men were rushing in, a number of them bearing flaring torches in their hands.

"Come, good friend," the chieftain cried, drawing himself for the work. "Ulin's fate is certain death. We have no chance against this force."

"And was the queen guilty after that?"

"Guilty after that!" repeated Horam, slowly and irresolutely. "What mean you? Do you imagine that I allowed her to live to commit more crime?"

"In mercy's name," cried Omar, "what do you mean by this speech? Do you remember Sanballad and Ben Huram?"

"Yes," replied Horam. "They were two of my chamberlains, who accompanied you to Aleppo at the time of which we have spoken."

"No," said Omar, "they did not quite go to Aleppo. I sent them back before I reached my capital. They brought to you my message?"

"I never saw them again after they went away with you," returned Horam.

"Never saw them. Good spirits of mercy! Are you in earnest, Horam? Aye. If they started on their return they must have been robbed and killed, for I never saw them after they left in your retinue."

The king of Aleppo clasped his hands in agony.

"O Horam! O Horam!" he exclaimed, "what a fearful mistake was that! Bear with me for pity's sake!"

"What is it, Omar?"

"Your beautiful queen was innocent!"

"Innocent!" gasped Horam, starting to his feet and then sinking back again.

"Yes, my brother," replied Omar in trembling tones. "She was as innocent as in that fateful hour when first she rested upon her mother's bosom. At that time a Jew, a woman whom I knew of my own knowledge, was supposing her to be the queen of Damascus. She was very beautiful, and so much did she remember the queen, that I thought that even I was at first deceived. Her name was Jarmon, and I had her brought to my palace, and had her confess to me that she had played the part of queen for a purpose which I have not been at liberty to reveal. She told me that the queen was innocent. She said that Jarmon was her friend, and that she was a captain of Hebrews, called The Tooth, flayed upon me in a moment I conversed with her, until I had called to my whole mind, and then I knew that the queen was innocent. It was all proved to me as clear as the sun at noonday. At first I had a thought of entrusting myself and bearing to you the sad tidings, but fearing lest I should be too late, I sent Sanballad and Ben Huram."

"And they slew my queen!"

"They did not slay her. They did not even harm her. They bore her away, and I thought that they had done it by your command."

"Bore her away! Where? Where?"

"Alas, brother, I know not. I was in my palace, and I had left the cave, and I was in conference with my chamberlains, when I was informed that a party of men had come to the cave, and had borne away the queen. I knew not what to think, but I thought that you had sent them. I knew not that you had sent back your chamberlains, and I knew not that they had slain the queen. I knew not that they had borne her away. I knew not that they had done aught but what I had ordered them to do. I knew not that you had sent them back to Damascus