

THE WIZARD'S SON.

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III.

IN THE TEMPLE COURT.

It was far into the first watch of the night. All had been quiet for over an hour in the one chamber of Tola's home. The boy, who had been lying motionless upon his low pallet, now raised himself and looked furtively toward the corner where lay his mother. It was too dark to discern if she was sleeping, and the boy went to see. A wave or more than ordinary tenderness swept over him as he gazed upon the prostrate form. With her long lashes sweeping her cheeks, one arm thrown over her head whence the black locks escaped to fall luxuriantly over breast and shoulders, with her lips slightly apart and her features in the perfect repose of slumber, Vashni appeared to her son more beautiful, more lovable, and withal more in need of protecting care, than he had ever beheld her. O, if when she awoke in the morning, it might be to lasting gladness, to the smile of friends, to a life such as others led! His thoughts became an unformulated prayer. It was now not only his own shame, his own isolation, that concerned him. It was yet more to hope for better things for this poor outcast.

Dodi, who always shared her master's bed, was likewise fast asleep. She scarcely blinked or moved, when the boy (first slipping a short, sheathed knife into his girdle), lifted her, wrapped an old woolen cloth round her, and carried her to the door.

Once outside, he heaved a sigh of relief. He scarcely paused to let the calm of the sombre spring night soothe his excited mood, but sped with all his might to the high-way. He shivered in the chill atmosphere and pressed the lamb close to him for warmth. Here and there, copses dotted the slope toward the city; ominous shadowy masses they were, huge black patches in the dark expanse

of meadow-lands. They had no terrors for Tola, however. The sky, deeply blue, was spangled with its myriad stars. From the battlement towers toward which he was speeding, gleamed numberless friendly lamps. These luminous sparks above and before him, together with the sense of his present absolute isolation, gave the boy courage to face the impending ordeal: the meeting of people in the gate-ways and in the city streets.

He had never yet been in Jerusalem. He had no idea of the labyrinth of streets he must traverse before reaching the Temple from this, the westward direction, and he would, despite his resolution and his hope, have surely been forced to retrace his steps had there been the usual closing of the gates at night-fall. But the time was singularly propitious for his enterprise. That evening the Passover Feast terminated with song and dancing in the great Temple Court, and many of the peasants round about came to Moriah to participate in or watch the spectacle which lasted until near midnight. When, therefore, he emerged from the lane into the high-road, Tola saw white-robed, hurrying forms making for the great central gate-way. His first impulse was to turn back. All his afternoon fears returned in full force. Supposing he were to be questioned? Supposing he were recognized by some herdsman or farmer's boy and driven off with cursings? How could he ever hope again? Then he remembered the image Vashni had shown him that afternoon at sundown; his own image reflected in the brass plate she had polished for the purpose. The poor, mad mother, with new found pride in her son's comely aspect, had brushed his tangled locks and twined them about her fingers so that they fell in glistening curls below his neck. She had put a coarse but clean shirt over his shoulders and fastened a wreath of bright red crocuses round his head. He had not been able to recognize himself in the reflection thus presented. Surely then no one else would be likely to recognize him, especially in the shadows of night. "And if I am known and shamed, it will be no worse than it was this morning," he thought, striving to keep firm to his resolve. "Whereas if I go and the great god accepts my gifts, all my mother's shame and mine will be lifted from us. Oh, I may not falter. I must go on. What else is there to do?"

Some moments later, he was one of a numerous company that neared the gate. None of the gay, merrily chatting people before and behind him could have fancied that in the breast of the hurrying lad who bent his wreathed head over a large bundle, a frightened little heart was beating well-nigh to bursting. Absorbed as all

were in their own glad anticipations, Tola was scarcely noticed. Once he encountered an elderly woman's smile and nod, and later he heard a good-humoured: "Are you alone, lad?" addressed to him by a tall, broad-shouldered shepherd who carried a child in his arms, and by whose side trudged a little woman all smiles and chattiness. Tola nodded in answer and fell back a few steps, but the sturdy fellow turned to him kindly and said: "Then stay with us. You are too young to go alone by night into the city."

Tola gazed after him gratefully. "It is already beginning, the good," he said to himself. "Perhaps the god sees me coming and is already kind. O, Dodi, how good, how good it is to be happy!"

He followed his new acquaintance through the gateway and through the strange, abruptly ascending and descending thoroughfares; grateful as much for the little woman's constant chatter (since it precluded his being interrogated) as for the man's occasional: "Ho, are you still there? That's right!" Or to his: "Here, my man, turn this way. Careful over that gutter—no, not down those steps. Here, follow me." Were many people good as this great fellow, he wondered.

Half unconsciously he took in the picturesque and confusing scenes about him. Women and men leaning on the gayly draped parapets of house-tops; short processions with horn and pipe and cymbals and blazing torches; tall masses of buildings here towering above, there rising beneath him; yonder to the right, a gigantic square structure (the old citadel) upon whose projecting stone balconies and in whose court swarmed a mass of indistinguishable forms and whence flashed gleams like huge will-o'-the-wisps. The forms were the soldiers from the armory, returned from the festal parade, and the gleams were the scintillation of their brazen helmets and shields. A great hollow lay beyond the citadel, bare of structures and almost void of life, a solitude in the midst of the city's animated aspect. And now, beyond a causeway and its abutting turret, rose the Temple's western gateway, hardly less massive than the arched gates of the city's walls. Festoons of vines and flowers hung from its upper chamber; lanterns, some red, some green, some white, were fastened in a semi-circle above each of the three arches. To right and left stretched long, rather low, walls, surmounted at intervals by one-storied structures. Here dwelled the inferior priests and the Temple slaves. Every one of these structures was studded with twinkling lamps, and the effect combining with that produced by the illuminated, two-winged sanctuary rising from the unseen court within, was weirdly beautiful.

Tola, ignorant of even the every-day aspect of the great city, was almost breathless with wonder. All thought of himself and his purpose, his hopes and his fears, were forgotten. He had become one of a multitude, as insignificant, as little likely to attract attention as one of the stones upon which he trod. In the press through the Temple gate, he had lost sight of his friendly guide. He did not notice this. There was too much else to engross him. The crowds here were denser than in the narrowest street, and appeared all to be making in one direction: toward the smaller, but higher enclosed court to the south of the altar. Tola, to guard his lamb from jostling, sought a more secluded spot. This was easy enough. He had only to move closer to the outer parapet and allow the crowds to pass him. For a long time, his merely standing in an angle formed by the wall and a projecting pillar and watching the shadowy spectacle, sufficed to satisfy his roused curiosity. But as the number of new-comers diminished and a view of the terraced court above him was thereby opened, he felt the desire to see the proceedings more closely. Moving along the wall for some dozen yards, he came to one of the short flights of steps that led to the inner court. A high coping, broken at regular intervals by stairways, extended in a great square round it. In each of the four corners rose a structure that resembled the watchtowers on the northern battlements, save that the lower story was surrounded by a colonnade porch between whose pillars heavy awnings or curtains were stretched. It was to the nearest of these structures that Tola directed his steps. The porch was thronged with spectators, and Tola could not press far enough to the front to see what was going on. Instead he was pushed more and more to the rear, until his shoulders struck the base of a pillar to which the end of a curtain was fastened. The pillar's base projected inward forming a kind of ledge. Tola, impeded by his burden, had some difficulty in climbing up to it; but once ensconced upon it, he could, by slightly pushing aside the curtain, obtain an excellent view of the panorama before him.

A thousand lights—purple, red, yellow, blue, and white—twinkled on the arched iron framework that stretched from gate to gate on three sides of the court. In front and on top of the coping that enclosed it, stood or sat the populace, a living wall of eager faces. In front of the altar stairway to the court's rear, so far from Tola that even his keen glance could scarcely distinguish their forms, sat those of the city's priests and dignitaries who cared to attend the festivities. The porch before the Holy Place and the

portals of each of the two high structures flanking it, were festooned with garlands and studded with lights, the latter so numerous that the two mighty brazen pillars upon the porch flashed as if under moonlight.

Tola did not know where to gaze first: at the wondrously illumined buildings, at the myriad expressive faces, or at the gracious maidenly figures dancing to the music of lute and harp in the court itself. His eyes roved hither and thither. He sought to disentangle the manifold impressions, but his mind was too confused.

Dance succeeded dance. The high-born maidens whose mincing steps were musically accentuated by the tinkling of their golden anklet-bells, had twice alternated with the more animated, if less airy, lowlier damsels, when from either side to rear of the court, there burst forth simultaneously a prolonged note as of a hundred stringed instruments, and in the next instant there issued a procession of choristers, decked with jewelled and brodered scarfs with sleeveless mantles and turbans, the latter blue or yellow or red, but so disposed that each hue formed a separate band in the broad ribbon of the processional. Tola had hardly time to wonder what this burst of sound might herald, had hardly noticed the dancing maidens join hands and encompass the advancing youths in an ever changing circle, now widening, now narrowing, when he became oblivious to everything but a swelling melody. Youthful masculine voices, lifted on wings of instrumental harmonies, sounded in his ears like supernal song. The chant, now glad and strong, now subdued and mournful, but always sweet, always thrilling, moved the boy to the depths of his being. The soul of music, awakened within him only that morning by Nelkah's singing, soared higher than then in its present enjoyment of the glorious tones. A something within him yearned to find expression in responsive song. His heart beat fast. What a blessing this was! O yes, here dwelled a wonder-working god. Here dwelled a god whose presence was light, whose presence was song. O, to be near such a one! To stand in that glad company, lifting voice and heart in praise and rejoicing! Were not that the richest blessing?

The chant ended. A merry outburst from viol and lute and harp gave the signal for youths and maidens to join in the dance. How fair the scene of flitting figures, of gay colors, of twinkling lights! But Tola saw it no longer. He had closed his eyes, seeking to resuscitate at least in memory the beautiful chant, the first choral melody that his artist soul had never known and with whose cessation all of joy had seemed to cease also. The bright strains that

still filled the air helped him sustain a delusion which his exhausted brain was conjuring up. He thought to hear anew the outburst of song. It became a deep, sonorous chanting, a glory of sound, above which Nelkah's voice rang clearest and most joyful. Lythe, airy forms bearing harps seemed floating around and above him. He, too, though he bore Dodi, a heavy burden,—no, it was a great, golden harp, this weight in his arms—he too, seemed rising; he too, was chanting. Yes, he had become one of the bright choristers soaring above the sanctuary, striving like the others to reach a radiant figure flitting above them all and beckoning him to follow. Was it Nelkah? Was it the kindly shepherd? Was it——? The boy, overpowered by a day's excitement and a night's unprecedented happiness, had fallen fast asleep on his secluded perch.

When he awoke, it was from a sense of cramped and aching limbs. He had been holding Dodi in his arms all the while he watched and slept and his sore muscles refused their office longer. He looked about him, startled and dazed. Where was he? He jumped from the ledge and emerged on the porch. Darkness all about him, with broad shadows frowning yet more darkly and towering grimly into the gray, starless heavens. Where was he?

The bleating of Dodi, who had fallen from his numb arms, recalled the confused child to his surroundings. All the beauty and joy of his last waking hour flooded his soul afresh as he scanned the sombre scene before him. He was in the Temple, where light and gladness had been revealed to him; in the Temple where he was to purchase continuance of that gladness by the sacrifice of his little lamb. His forgotten purpose, thus recalled, needed no effort in the fulfillment. He was certain that Dodi had been sent across his path for this only: to insure by her death his oneness with the people of the "great god." And now at this very hour, the last of a glorious night, the deed must be consummated. There, beyond the twin gates of the court, whence had issued those sweet-voiced choristers, stood the altar for the burnt-offerings, shadowy and awful, almost forbidding. There he must slay his one treasure.

Utterly void of fear—so used was he to solitude and silence—he sped across the great expanse where only a few hours (a short dream-moment) ago, a hundred feet had trodden the festal dance, around which had glimmered a myriad colored lights, and which had been enclosed by a living wall of glad spectators,—across this great expanse, so deserted and shadow-encompassed now, Tola sped, holding the lamb tight to him. Across the court and through one of the gates and toward the great altar.

Poor child! Does no instinct tell him that this ascent is sacred to the ministers of a jealous god? That no hand save that consecrated by years of service must lay a purified and sanctified offering upon the shrine? That a maimed beast is an abomination to the deity? No; no instinct warns him. Only for a second, the natural shrinking from bloodshed deters the little hand raised to strike the confiding creature placed at foot of the altar, then hope and resolve supervene. One agonized bleat and Dodi is bleeding her life away.

Tola clasped the neck his knife had so fatally pierced. "O Dodi, forgive me, I had to do it!" The little beast's cry had sent a pang to the boy's heart. He held it close till the death-struggle was over. He might have remained still longer, but as he raised his tear-stained face, a rosy streak on the edge of the eastern horizon warned him that it was nearly morning, and that he must return at once. He gazed round wondering how he might find his way back and out of the city. Beyond the altar, stood the "great god's" house, the same whose high, flanking towers he had often seen from his distant dwelling. Perhaps to its rear was an exit that might bring him speedily to the city's northern gate. He would try.

A vague misgiving was upon him as, so near to the abode of an unknown deity, he descended the altar steps on the farther side. In the bronze-pillared portico before the "Holy Place" a single large red light was shining. There dwelled the god. Tola gazed reverently within. A row of two-armed candelabra, fastened low on the walls to right and left, lit up the rather small but high apartment dimly; brightly enough, however, to hold the boy spell-bound at sight of the flowers, cherubim, palm-leaves and clusters of fruits carved in unbroken masses on the cedar walls from floor to ceiling. The latter, also carved, was a huge canopy of palm-branches and pomegranate blossoms. Garlands of natural flowers twined round the cedar pillars to the deep-recessed windows behind them, and hung festooned to the upper corners of a gorgeously woven curtain which hung suspended across the full width of the room.

Tola stood entranced at sight of this curtain with its wondrously wrought imagery: birds and winged animals and blossoming plants, their brilliant colorings only just discernable in the dim illumination. Silence and weirdness and beauty lured him within. He did not feel the damp chill of morn nor the gust of a sudden fierce wind that penetrated to even this secluded spot. He did not perceive the wild flaring of the lights to his left until a sharp, crackling sound in the midst of awful stillness, diverted his look. One

of the lights, elongated by the wind, had set fire to a garland just in front of it. Tola saw a little flame creeping swiftly toward the splendid curtain. One instant more and it would reach it. O, that must not be. This beautiful curtain, this dwelling of the "Great God" threatened with destruction? He rushed farther into the Holy Place, sprang upon the pillar nearest the flaring, greedy little flames, tore the garland from its place and trampled it violently under foot. O, how fortunate that he had been by to—

"Accursed, blasphemous viper, have I caught you in the act?"

IV.

"STONE HIM!"

Tola, pinioned by strong hands, powerless to move, turned his blanched face to the speaker. It was Joshua, the passionate priest who for the second time in twenty-four hours was converting his joy into bitterness.

Nelkahi's father, whose duty it was, with two others, to offer up the daily morning-sacrifice that week, had risen before dawn. He dwelled with his father-in-law, the High-Priest Hilkiah, in the left wing of the sanctuary. When he issued into the court before the doorway, to await his comrades, he thought to behold a small figure flit past the pillar Boaz and into the sacred portico. He communicated his discovery to the two other priests as soon as they joined him. These, astonished as himself that any human foot save of the consecrated should dare to enter the naos, hesitated to investigate lest they be confronted by an evil spirit. Joshua was more determined. He ascended the porch steps, entered the Holy Place, and perceived with wrathful amazement that a boy with blood-stained garments and dishevelled hair, and with gestures of seeming hatred and rage, was trampling under foot the garlands which his own daughter and her companions had hung in the sanctuary. A glimpse of Tola's profile, and he instantly recognized "the sorcerer's son," and as instantly made up his mind that the boy's act was one of sacrilegious violence.

"Hither, Ithamar! Hither, Jonadab! An evil spirit it is, but one whose malice shall this day be strangled in death. A reviler of Yahvé, one of the cursed brood who still cherish their father's idols and who would gladly see the Lord's house trampled into dust as he has trampled yonder blossoms. What says the Law, Ithamar? Shall he burned with fire, or stoned, the daring wretch! Oh,

the abomination! 'The Moabite brat! 'The scorpion's nestling! Which, Ithamar, stoning or fire?"

Tola, beside himself with terror, would have fallen on his knees but that the iron grip still held him fast. His brain reeled. Only two words of the savage outburst penetrated his understanding. "A reviler of Yahvé!" "Stoning!"

"No, no, my lord!" he shrieked in his wild fear. "I did not desecrate this holy place. I only tried to save it. To save it! Oh, believe me, believe me, I only tried to save it!"

"Lying cur, silence!" Joshua was dragging the boy out of the naos and into the portico. Of the other two priests, the younger looked fierce as himself, but the elder's expression was one of doubt.

"Wait a moment, Joshua," he ventured. "Perhaps the lad may not be so guilty after all. What brought you to the Temple, boy? How did you enter? The gates have been closed since midnight."

"I came last evening. I wanted to sacrifice a lamb to the great god here," Tola answered, trembling in every limb. "I could not offer it till morning. I thought—I thought—"

"Offer up a lamb! You, an outcast slave, a wizard's brat!" Joshua shrieked the words. His fanatical spirit was more outraged by this revelation than it had been by the seeming blasphemous trampling of the consecrated flowers. "Where, O holy Yahvé? Where has he dared, where sacrificed?"

Tola, still pinioned, pointed as best he could toward the beautiful altar. A number of Temple slaves and Levites, roused by Joshua's outbursts, had by this time gathered round. Some of these, accompanied by the old priest Ithamar, ran toward the altar stairs. Joshua, in the meantime, told the others of the boy's fancied outrage upon the Holy Place, told of his shameful parentage, of his evident power for evil that he had bewitched his daughter, Nelkahi, the previous day. She had begged until nightfall to have the child brought to her and had become ill when this was denied her. Had not old Ithamar, zealous as any of them for the Lord, been softened by only a glance? But the priest's final words, his revilement of Tola's unholy sacrifice, enraged these narrow-minded men, proud and jealous of their prerogatives, more than aught else. A heathen child, one who did not even know the name of their deity, bringing him sacrifice? Incredible! On the contrary, obedient rather to the suggestions of his own evil gods, the boy had sought to pollute Yahvé's holy altar. Their belief in his guilt was confirmed when Ithamar, followed by the horrified Temple servitors,

came running toward them with little Dodi's cracass held aloft. 'The boy had really dared? Had spilled unhallowed blood! And, horror of horrors, the animal was a female and maimed at that! 'Triple pollution! Abomination of abominations! 'The child was death's.

"Stone him! Stone him!" they shouted.

Tola's frantic appeals, his sobs, his reiteration of innocence were not even heard in the tumult that now sounded about him. Almost fainting with terror, followed by an ever waxing concourse, he was dragged by a slave to whom Joshua had flung him, out into the court, through gates and down stairways, and over the narrow causeway into the stirring city.

"A blasphemer! A sorcerer's son! A polluter of the holy shrine! Stone him! Stone him." These cries were taken up by many of those whom the savage train encountered. If among the horrified throngs that ran to witness the grim procession, some gentle woman, some aged man, some uncomprehending child, looked mournfully at the hapless ashen boy, their sympathy could avail him nothing. Priests were his accusers, priests were his judges, priests his executioners. And to their revered decrees—reverenced profoundly since the discovery and promulgation and acceptance of the New Law a half a generation before—all true sons and daughters of Judah would bow unquestioningly.

V.

THE MOTHER.

Alas for Tola!

Vashni awoke at daybreak. Her head was heavy and painful as always after the torturing dreams that accompanied her slumbers. She tossed restlessly from side to side striving to shake off the dull aching. Then she missed something: Tola's quick step to her side and the wet cloth that he always placed upon her head when the pain at her temples was more than ordinarily intense. She started up with a cry. No, he was not on his pallet. She ran to the door, opened it, and looked anxiously into the little garden where he loved to work. But he was not there either. "Tola! Tola!" she cried in alarm. "Tola!"

Only the echo for an answer.

The unsubstantial fears and visions with which half this poor mad woman's life was filled, were dispelled by a real terror. Mother-love, almost always dormant in presence of her boy, became intensely, painfully roused under the influence of fear for his safety.

She longed to hold him close, to look into his sad eyes, to watch him dig round his flower-beds or water his plants, or only to hear his sweet, clear whistling beyond the hillock. O, for a sign of him!

Then she smiled as any sane mother might at her foolish terror. "He has gone to gather berries fresh for my morning meal," she said aloud. "The good child! Yes, he has gone to gather berries. Only yesterday he told me how fast they were ripening on the sunny slopes. I, too, must surprise him. I must make him one of the little cakes my mother taught me how to make in far-off Ar-Moab. The child, the dear child, he loves them. I have not made him one in many a long day. Alas, alas! you have not a good mother, my poor Tola."

But even as she busied herself, the terror returned, and ever and anon she ran to the door and called tremulously, shrilly: "Tola! Tola!" The little cake was done. Should she milk the goat as Tola always did after sunrise? Should she hunt for eggs by the bushes and in the hedge as he did? O, why was he so long at gathering the berries? Poor child, he did not think that his care to give her joy was giving her so much pain!

In her anxiety she wandered as far as the lane.

Hark! What was that buzzing sound from the distant high-road? O, Kemosh, great god, what are those tones, faint but menacing, abrupt and sharp, borne upon the misty air of morning? Nearer they sound; clearer. Now in isolated threats, now in commingled incoherence. Is it another poor wretch whom they drive hither to his death, those cruel people of Jerusalem? Will another victim's groans and cries for mercy swell the mad chorus that nightly shrieks in her dreams?

In the hideous recollection that made her live again as so often before that wretched hour when her husband in sight of her and his new-born babe was goaded on to a slow-torturing death, Vashni forgot her present fear. She turned to flee out of sight and hearing of the tragedy she felt to be impending. "Tola!" she screamed as she reached her patch of ground. "Child, child, you must not hear, you must not see! Come within! Come within!"

But now the deserted garden, the empty house, gave to her distracted thoughts another turn. Tola away. What if—O, what if it was upon him, too, his father's doom was descending? What if those dreadful voices were reviling him as once his father had been reviled? She reeled under the sudden intuition. A blackness, broken by flashes of lurid light, clogged her vision for a moment. Then, staggering at first, a roaring in her ears and a mist still blur-

ring her sight, the frantic woman rushed once more into the lane; faster and faster as the uproar approached; faster and faster and toward the highway.

Yes, there he came, tottering as he walked, driven toward the fatal rift by the lashes of his persecutors. The cowards, the curs, the cruel, wicked hundreds pursuing the one defenceless child, the innocent, the gentle! O, the dread in those great eyes! O, the pallor of his quivering features, and O, the heart-breaking portent of that baleful cry: "Stone him! Stone him!"

Above the muttered curses, the shrill denunciations, the revilings and the threats, commingled as they were in one sustained uproar, rang a piercing cry: "Tola, my son! O, No! No! No!" And a figure, as terrible in its frenzied fury and grief as an avenging angel, rushed from the by-path toward the panting child.

With an almost superhuman effort, Tola recovered his spent forces. "Mother, mother, O save me!" he cried, springing forward with a hunted animal's fleetness, and threw himself, utterly exhausted, into the protecting embrace.

"The witch! Kill her! Stone them both!" shouted sundry of the crowd, pressing forward, the infuriated Joshua at their head. "Snatch the boy from her!" "Let her see him die and then away with her, too!" "Accursed Moabites!" "Blasphemers of Yahvé!" Tola heard nothing of this. Wild sobs shook his frame. He clung with all his might to the dear, protecting arms. "Mother, mother!" he moaned in midst of his weeping.

His appeal and the imminence of his fate restored to the frantic woman all the courage and resolution, aye, and all the instinctive intelligence with which motherhood can be endowed. From that frantic, heartless priest whose hatred had pursued her husband unto death, whose hatred was pursuing her and her child to the brink of the same abyss, from him who led this murderous throng with the authority given by spiritual supremacy, from him she could expect no mercy. Where then find aid?

"The witch!" "The child of death!" "Stone him!" "Stone them both!"

"Mother! Mother!"

Aid! Where find it? Where but in self-forgetful, self-immolating love?

The advancing crowd now beheld a strange spectacle. The woman whose wild appeal had only a moment before rung forth so stridently, flung the child from her. With head erect and flashing eyes she awaited the oncoming of Joshua, first of the frantic pur-

suers to reach her. "Aye, stone him, stone him!" she cried in tones vibrant as her first appeal had been. "Stone him, and let me be avenged at last on your cruel will. Stone the child! Aye, stone him, heartless people all, and when 'tis done, let Joshua lament him as I lament a husband who was more innocent than the boy himself! Why should I shield the child? Have I a part in him? Nay, Know, cruel priest, the boy is no son of mine, the boy is yours!"

Joshua fell back. "She lies!" he cried. "It is a stratagem to save him. She lies!" But even with the words, his hands fell nerveless to his side. "Seize her! Bind her! Torture her with slow fire! Let her confess that she lies!"

"Lies? Nay, but that I nurtured him at this breast, but that I saw his first faint smile, but that I lied to myself all these years and taught myself to believe he was my own dead babe, I would keep silence now and let your hardness of heart revenge itself. You should, but that I loved him once, goad all that cowardly multitude to slay Abigail's son as they slew my Shallum!"

"It cannot be! It cannot be my son! My son died after but three days of life!" Joshua shrieked. "He lies upon his mother's breast in the tomb of Olivet. This child is yours!"

"Stone him then if you believe it!" Vashni laughed discordantly. "Stone him! See, I heed his prayers no longer. See, I must hate him now whom once I loved, hate him for his bloody father's sake!" She pushed Tola, who had been newly clinging to her, away as though she loathed him indeed.

Joshua was powerless to act. The crowd, silent now and straining to hear, closed round the strange group. "Her spell is upon me," groaned the priest. "Question her, Jonadab. Be you the judge of this. I cannot. My babe? It died twelve years ago. I have no son."

The young priest who had been a witness and a participant in Joshua's fury from its commencement, stepped close to the heroic mother. "Prove that you are not lying," he said sternly. "The boy is your son in spirit if not in flesh. He must die a torturing death in any case, for he is guilty of abomination. If he is Joshua's son, how came he to you? Speak, woman!"

Vashni felt her brain whirling. Fantastic thoughts again mingled with realities in her mind. She laughed aloud once more, a crazed, horrible laugh. "Come, Tola, come. We will go home. Mine? His? Whose? O, Shallum! O, Abigail! Tola, Tola! Would you go with your father? Horrible! Horrible! Would you leave me and go with your father?"

"Mother, mother, save me from him! Only save me!" Tola clasped her waist, his tears flowed on her hands.

At that word, love again dominated madness. "Mother? I am no mother of yours. My babe lies sleeping on Abigail's breast," she wailed, wringing her hands. "Give me back my dead babe, O cruel Joshua, and take your own again. Oh! you do not believe me. You think me raving as often I rave by the stony rift where you slew my Shallum. No, no! I speak truly. By Kemosh I swear it! Listen! Listen, my lord. Do you remember the night I came to implore Abigail to save my Shallum? Do you remember how you spurned me, albeit you were happy in the birth of a son and should have been merciful? Oh! yes you remember. But you do not know of the misery that followed. You did not see my Shallum stagger and bleed under the cruel missiles. Oh, I see him yet, I see him yet! I saw him all that day, all that night, as I sat by the rift. I heard not my infant's cry for food. I—I knew not I had an infant until I felt something icy cold against my arm. My babe it was, my little dead babe, dead—because its mother heard not its cries for food. I—I looked upon its little face and I called you its murderer, as I had called you Shallum's so often. I seemed to see you proud and happy in your boy while I was widowed and— and childless. Then came the news of Abigail's death, and some evil spirit whispered to me that your babe would die too, and that you would be punished for your cruelty to Shallum. I longed to see the babe die, longed to see your grief. I crept forth to witness both. Your old slave, Anna, thought I had come to take one last look at my poor Abigail, dead and cold upon her bier. But I had only come to see your grief. She took me into an inner chamber. There sat the nurse, and in her lap, strong and healthy, was your son. O no, he would not die. You would be happy in your son for years, I thought. Happy for years and years. Then the evil spirit whispered how I might be avenged. I—I—I—" Vashni hesitated. The stream of her narrative, a blending of truth and falsehood (for she had indeed gone to see her dead mistress the night before the funeral), the stream of her narrative threatened to be dammed. The breathless listeners fancied this hesitation due to reluctance to confess her full guilt. But almost instantly, an inspiration came. "I had learned a spell from Shallum," she continued, speaking faster and exultantly; "I cast it over the nurse, over the women lamenting in the funeral chamber. I caught up your babe, took off its dainty robes and put them on my own dead little one, and swiftly, ere the spell should break, I fled out into the night and

from the city. And now," she stood before them, wild, beautiful, defiant; "now kill me for the spell. I have robbed you of twelve years of happiness! Kill me for it!"

"Yes, kill her! Kill her, the vile wretch! The robber of babies! She has confessed, let her die!" These shouts, inaugurated by the priest Jonadab, were taken up by one and all of the enraged onlookers. But Joshua was still passive. He looked at the boy. That child his? That trampler of the sacred blossoms, that polluter of the sacred shrine, his son? He hid his face in his hands.

Tola had been gazing from his mother to the priest. He was too staggered by the revelation coming so immediately after his deadly peril, to think coherently. A father? No longer an outcast? Not his mother's son? A child as others, but destined to see one beautiful, beloved face no more! What could it all mean? Then he was dominated by two equally strong impressions: One was Joshua's furtive, fearsome, and yet longing gaze, a gaze that questioned even while it desired; a gaze of blended doubt and yearning. The other was the swelling chorus of threats against Vashni. His danger was becoming hers.

He threw himself at Joshua's feet. "Oh, if what my mother says is true, if you are indeed my father, forgive her! She cared for me, she loved me. She was so sad and lonely, but she loved me! Oh, if you are my father, grant my first prayer. She was so good to me!"

"Good?" Joshua found his voice at last. "She brought you up a wizard, an idolatrous wretch! She taught you her unhallowed arts and how to desecrate the shrine of Yahvé. My son? Nay, even so it be that Abigail bore you to me, I may not pardon. The hater of Yahvé I may not pardon."

"Listen, listen but once again, O you who are my father! I hate not the great god. I love him. I have loved him ever since I heard the sweet songs of praise his worshippers sang on the mountain yonder. It was because I loved him that I gave up my lamb—it was all I had. If I had been rich and blessed as you, I would have bestowed a greater gift. But it was all I had, and I thought the god would understand, would know how I longed to be one of his worshippers, and I thought he would accept the gift. And then when I saw the garland burning, when I saw the beautiful curtain threatened by the flame, I did not think I was doing wrong to snatch it down and extinguish the fire. I only thought to save the hanging and the beautiful chamber from burning. I did not know that the great god could keep his beautiful dwelling from harm

without my wretched aid. But now I know. Oh, you believe me now, do you not?" The fervor of his tone carried conviction. "You will believe me when I say that my heart longs to praise your god as you do, and, Oh! far more, longs to sing to him as I heard the glad youths singing to him in the Temple at midnight. O, you who are my father, you who love the god, see, I too, would love him. I would understand and serve him as you do! Teach me to serve him as you do!"

Joshua's fanatic heart was touched in its deepest feelings. Not a desecrator of the sanctuary, but its saviour? Not an idolator of the hated Kemosh, but a worshipper of Yahvé? One who might grow up to take his own place when age or death called him from his loved work? A son, who would consecrate himself to the Lord's service, who would love His precepts?

"My son, my son, indeed!" He stooped, raised the kneeling child and clasped him close. "Nelkah was wiser than I," he whispered. Then, turning his radiant face toward the people, he asked: "Do you believe him, my brothers? Aye, it was Yahvé's way of restoring unto me my own. But the woman—" His brow darkened. "Lost! twelve years of joy lost!" he muttered savagely. "Drag the foul slave—"

Tola's appealing look restrained him anew. "Let her go," he commanded hoarsely. "Yahvé shall judge her." His meaning look encountered Jonadab's.

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Not long after, any one entering the "witch's" dwelling, hard by "The Place of Stoning," would have seen a prostrate figure clutching the worn coverlet on Tola's pallet—would have heard low sobs and moans, and perhaps distinguished words that recalled those of King David mourning for Absalom: "O, Tola, my son, my son, I am dying for thee! O, Tola, my son, my son!"

Such a one, remaining until sun-down, would have seen two swarthy figures entering the hut: one the fierce young priest, Jonadab, the other a negro slave; would have seen a bright sword flash in the darkness of the chamber and seen it drawn, hallowed by a mother's sacrificial blood, from Vashni's quivering breast.

"O Tola, I am dying for thee!" The words were broken, inarticulate, but in the eyes, ere they closed in death, shone a great joy.