

Saltus Edgar

Mary Magdalen: A Chronicle



Edgar Saltus

Mary Magdalen: A Chronicle

«Public Domain»

Saltus E.

Mary Magdalen: A Chronicle / E. Saltus — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Saltus Edgar

Mary Magdalen: A Chronicle

CHAPTER I

“Three to one on Scarlet!”

Throughout the brand-new circus were the eagerness, the gesticulations, shouts, and murmurs of an impatient throng. On a ledge above the entrance a man stood, a strip of silk extended in his finger-tips. Beneath, on either side, were gates. About him were series of ascending tiers, close-packed, and brilliant with multicolored robes and parasols. The sand of the track was very white: where the sunlight fell it had the glitter of broken glass. In the centre was a low wall; at one end were pillars and seven great balls of wood; at the other, seven dolphins, their tails in the air. The uproar mounted in unequal vibrations, and stirred the pulse. The air was heavy with odors, with the emanations of the crowd, the cloy of myrrh. Through the exits whiffs of garlic filtered from the kitchens below, and with them, from the exterior arcades, came the beat of timbrels, the click of castanets. Overhead was a sky of troubled blue; beyond, a lake.

“They are off!”

The strip of silk had fluttered and fallen, the gates flew open, there was a rumble of wheels, a whirlwind of sand, a yell that deafened, and four tornadoes burst upon the track.

They were shell-shaped, and before each six horses tore abreast. Between the horses' ears were swaying feathers; their manes had been dyed clear pink, the forelocks puffed; and as they bounded, the drivers, standing upright, had the skill to guide but not the strength to curb. About their waists the reins were tied; at the side a knife hung; from the forehead the hair was shaven; and every thing they wore, the waistcoat, the short skirt, the ribbons, was of one color, scarlet, yellow, emerald, or blue: and this color, repeated on the car and on the harness, distinguished them from those with whom they raced.

Already the cars had circled the hippodrome four times. There were but three more rounds, and Scarlet, which in the beginning had trailed applause behind it as a torch trails smoke, lagged now a little to the rear. Green was leading. Its leadership did not seem to please; it was cursed at and abused, threatened with naked fist; yet when for the sixth time it turned the terminal pillar, a shout that held the thunder of Atlas leaped abroad. Where the yellow car, pursued by the blue, had been, was now a mass of sickening agitation – twelve fallen horses kicking each other into pulp, the drivers brained already; and down upon that barrier of blood and death swept the scarlet car. In a second it veered and passed; in that second a flash of steel had out the reins, and, as the car swung round, the driver, released, was tossed to the track. What then befell him no one cared. Stable-men were busy there; the car itself, unguided, continued vertiginously on its course. If it had lagged before, there was no lagging now. The hoofs that beat upon the ring plunged with it through the din down upon Emerald, and beyond it to the goal. And as the last dolphin vanished and the seventh ball was removed, the palm was granted, and the spectators shouted a salutation to the giver of the games – Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee.

He was superb, this Antipas. His beard was like a lady's fan. On his cheeks was a touch of alkanet; his hair, powdered blue, was encircled by a diadem set with gems. About his shoulders was a mantle that had a broad purple border; beneath it was a tunic of yellow silk. Between the railing of the tribune in which he sat one foot was visible, shod with badger's skin, dyed blood-red. He was superb, but his eyelids drooped. He had a straight nose and a retreating fore head, a physiognomy that was at once weak and vicious. He looked melancholy; it may be that he was bored. At the salutation, however, he affected a smile, and motioned that the games should continue. And as the

signals, the dolphins and the seven balls, appeared again, his thoughts, forsaking the circus, went back to Rome.

Insecure in the hearts of his people, uncertain even of the continued favor of the volatile monster who was lounging then in his Caprian retreat, it was with the idea of pleasing the one, of flattering the other, that he had instituted the games. For here in his brand-new Tiberias, a city which he had built in a minute, whose colonnades and porticoes he had bought ready-made in Rome, and had erected by means of that magic which only the Romans possessed – in this capital of a parvenu was a mongrel rabble of Greeks, Cypriotes, Egyptians, Cappadocians, Syrians, and Jews, whose temper was uncertain, and whose rebellion to be feared.

Annonâ et spectaculis indeed! Antipas knew the dictum well; and with an uprising in the yonderland, and a sedition under his feet, what more could he do than quell the first with his mercenaries, and disarm the second with his games? Tiberius, whom he emulated, never deigned to appear at the hippodrome; it was a way he had of showing his contempt for a nation. Antipas might have imitated his sovereign in that, only he was not sure that Tiberius would take the compliment as it was meant. He might view such abstention as the airs of a trumpery tetrarch, and depose him there and then. He was irascible, and when displeased there were dungeons at his command which reopened with difficulty, and where existence was not secure. Ah, that sausage of blood and mud, how he feared and envied him! An emperor now, a god hereafter, truly the dominion of this world and a part of the next was a matter concerning which fear and envy well might be.

And as Antipas' vagabond fancy roamed in and out through the possibilities of the Caesar's sway, unconsciously he thought of another monster, the son of a priest of Ascalon, who had defied the Sanhedrim, won Cleopatra, murdered the woman he loved the most, conquered Judæa and found it too small for his magnificence – of that Herod in fact, his own father, who gave to Jerusalem her masterpiece of marble and gold, and meanwhile, drunk with the dream of empire, had made himself successor of Solomon, Sultan of Israel, King of the Jews, and who, even as he died, had vomited death and crowns, diadems and crucifixions.

It was through his legacy that Antipas ruled. The kingdom had been sliced into three parts, of one of which Augustus had made a province; over another a brother whom he hated ruled; and he had but this third part, the smallest yet surely the most fair. Its unparalleled garden surrounded him, and its eye, the lake, was just beyond. In the amphitheatre the hills formed was a city of pink and blue marble, of cupolas, porticoes, volutes, bronze doors, and copper roofs. Along the fringe of the shore were Choraizin and Bethsaïda, purple with pomegranates, Capharnahum, beloved for its honey, and Magdala, scented with spice. The slopes and intervalles were very green where they were not yellow, and there were terraces of grape, glittering cliffs, and a sky of troubled blue, wadded with little gold-edged clouds.

Yes, it was paradise, but it was not monarchy. It was to that he aspired. As he mused, a rancid-faced woman decked with paint and ostrich-plumes snarled in his ear:

“What have you heard of Iohanan?”

And as with a gesture he signified that he had heard nothing, she snarled again.

Antipas turned to her reflectively, but it was of another that he thought – the brown-eyed bride that Arabia had given him, the lithe-limbed princess of the desert whose heart had beaten on his own, whom he had loved with all the strength of youth and weakness, and whom he had deserted while at Rome for his brother's wife, his own niece, Herodias, who snarled at his side.

Behind her were her women, and among them was one who, as the cars swept by, turned her head with that movement a flower has which a breeze has stirred. Her eyes were sultry, darkened with stibium; on her cheek was the pink of the sea-shell, and her lips made one vermilion rhyme. The face was oval and rather small; and though it was beautiful as victory, the wonder of her eyes, which looked the haunts of hope fulfilled, the wonder of her mouth, which seemed to promise more than any mortal mouth could give, were forgotten in her hair, which was not orange nor flame, but

a blending of both. And now, as the cars passed, her thin nostrils quivered, her hand rose as a bird does and fluttered with delight.

On the adjacent tiers were Greeks, fat-calved Cypriotes, Cappadocians with flowers painted on their skin, red Egyptians, Thracian mercenaries, Galilean fishermen, and a group of Lydians in women's clothes.

On the tier just beyond was a man gazing wistfully at the woman that sat behind Herodias. He was tall and sinewy, handsome with the comeliness of the East. His beard was full, unmarred at the corners; his name was Judas. Now and then he moistened his under lip, and a Thracian who sat at his side heard him murmur "Mary" and some words of Syro-Chaldaic which the Thracian did not understand.

To him Mary paid no attention. She had turned from the track. An officer had entered the tetrarch's tribune and addressed the prince. Antipas started; Herodias colored through her paint. The latter evidently was pleased.

"Iohanan!" she exclaimed. "To Machærus with him! You may believe in fate and mathematics; I believe in the axe."

And questioningly Herodias looked at her husband, who avoided her look, yet signified his assent to the command she had given.

The din continued. From the tier beyond, Judas still gazed into the perils of Mary's eyes.

"Dear God," he muttered, in answer to an anterior thought, "it would be the birthday of my life."

CHAPTER II

“O Prophet Iohanan, how fair you are!”

Iohanan was hideous. His ankles were in stocks, a chain about his waist was looped in a ring that hung from the wall. About his body were tattered furs, his hair was tangled, the face drawn and yellow. Vermin were visible on his person. His lips twitched, and his gums, discolored, were as those of a camel that has journeyed too far. A tooth projected, green as a fresh almond is; the chin projected too, and from it on one side a rill of saliva dripped upon the naked breast. On the terrace he was a blur, a nightmare in a garden.

“Ah, how fair!”

Tantalizing as temptation, Mary stood just beyond his reach. Her eyes were full of compliments, her body was bent, and, the folds of her gown held back, she swayed a little, in the attitude of one cajoling a tiger. She was quite at home and at her ease, and yet prepared for instant flight.

Iohanan, or John – surnamed, because of practices of his, the Baptist – beckoned her to approach. In his eyes was the innocence that oxen have.

“My body is chained, but my soul is free!”

Mary made a pirouette, and through the terrace of the citadel the rattles on her ankles rang.

It was appalling, this citadel; it dominated the entire land. Perched on a peak of basalt, it overhung an abyss in which Asphalitis, the Bitter Sea, lay, a stretch of sapphire to the sun. In the distance were the heights of Abraham, the crests of Gilead. Before it was the infinite, behind it the desert. At its base a hamlet crouched, and a path hewn in the rock crawled in zigzags to its gates. Irregular walls surrounded it, in some places a hundred cubits high, and in each of the many angles was a turret. Seen from below it was a threat in stone, but within was a caress, one of those rapturous palaces that only the Orientals build. It was called Machærus. Peopled with slaves and legends, it was a haunt of ghosts and fierce delights.

And now as Mary tripped before the prophet the walls alone repelled. The terrace was a garden in which were lilies and sentries. For entrance there was a portal of red porphyry, above which was a balcony hemmed by a balustrade of yellow Numidian stone.

Against it Antipas leaned. He had been eyeing the desert in tremulous surmise. The day before, he had caught the glitter of lances, therewith spirals of distant smoke, and he had become fearful lest Aretas, that king of Arabia Petræa whose daughter he had deserted, might be meditating attack. But now there was nothing, at most a triangular mass speeding westwards, of which only the edges moved, and which he knew to be a flight of cranes.

He took heart again and gazed in the valley below. It was the anniversary of his birth. To celebrate it he had invited the stewards of his lands, the notables of Galilee, the elect of Jerusalem, the procurator of Judæa, the emir of Tadmor, mountaineers and Pharisees, Scribes and herdsmen.

But in the valley only a few shepherds were visible. Along the ramparts soldiers paced. At the further end of the terrace a group of domestics was busy with hampers and luggage. The day was solemnly still, exquisitely clear; and between two hills came a glare of gold projected from the Temple of Jerusalem.

Through the silence rang the tinkle of the rattles that Mary wore. The prophet was beckoning her.

“And Martha?” the tetrarch heard him ask.

The pirouette ceased awkwardly. Mary’s eyes forgot their compliments. Her brows contracted, and, as though perplexed, she held her head a little to one side.

“There,” he added, “there, I know you well. It was at Bethany I saw you first. Yes, yes, I remember perfectly; you were leaving, and Martha was in tears. Only a little since I had speech

with her. She spoke of you; she knew you were called the Magdalen. No,” he continued, for Mary had shrunk back, “no, I will not curse. There is another by whom you will be blessed.”

Mary laughed. “I am going to Rome. Tiberius will give me a palace. I shall sleep on the down the Teutons bring. I shall drink pearls dissolved in falernian. I shall sup on peacocks’ tongues.”

“No, Mary, Rome you will never see. The Eternal has you in His charge. Your shame will be washed away.”

“Shame to you,” she interrupted. “Shame and starvation too.” She made as though she were about to pirouette again. “Whom are you talking of?”

“One whose shoes I am unworthy to bear.”

For a moment he seemed to meditate; then, with the melancholy of one renouncing some immense ambition, he murmured, half to himself, half to the sky, “For him to increase I must diminish.”

“As for that, you are not much to look at now. I must go. I must braid my hair; the emir’s eyes are eager.”

“Mary,” he hissed, and the sudden asperity of his voice coerced her as a bit might do, “you will go to Capharnahum, you will seek him, you will say Iohanan is descended into the tombs to announce the Son of David.”

Through the lateral entrance to the terrace a number of guests had entered. From the balcony above, Antipas leaned and listened. Some one touched him; it was Herodias.

“The procurator is coming,” she announced. “You should be at the gate.”

“Ah!”

He seemed indifferent. What Iohanan had said concerning the Son of David stirred him like the point of a sword. He felt that there could be no such person; his father had put a stop to all that. And yet, if there were!

His indifference surprised Herodias.

“What are you staring at?” she asked; and to assure herself she looked over the balustrade. “That carrion? You should – ”

Her hand drawn across her throat completed the sentence.

The tetrarch shook his head. There was no hurry. Then, too, the prophet was useful. He reviled Jerusalem, and that flattered Galilee. But there was another reason, which he kept to himself. Iohanan affected him as no one had done before.

He feared him, chained though he was, and into that fear something akin to admiration entered. In his heart he wished he had let him alone. No, there was no hurry. As he assured her of that the prophet looked up.

“Jezebel!”

The guests approached. Their number had increased. There were Greek merchants from Hippos and Sepphoris, Pharisees from Jericho, and Scribes from Jerusalem. Herodias clapped her hands. A negro, naked to the waist, appeared.

“Take him below.”

But the guests surrounded Iohanan. The Pharisees recognized him at once. He was the terror of the hierarchs.

As he cried out at Herodias he seemed as though he would rise and wrench his bonds and mount to where she was. His eyes had lost their pathos; they blazed.

“Woe unto you!” he shouted, “and woe unto your barren bed! Though you hid in the bowels of the earth, in the uttermost depths of a jungle, the stench of your incest would betray you. Woe unto you, I say; the swine will turn from you, the Eternal will rend you, and the heart of hell will vomit you back!”

Herodias shook with anger. She was livid. Murmurs circulated through the increasing throng.

The Pharisees edged nearer. On their foreheads were slips of vellum on which passages of the Law had been inscribed. About their left arms other slips extended spiralwise from the elbow to the end of the third finger. They were in white; where their garments had become soiled, the spots had been chalked.

To them the prophet showed his teeth. “And woe unto you too, race of vipers, bladders of wind! As the fire devours the stubble, and the flame consumes the chaff, so your root will be rottenness and your seed go up as dust. Fear will engulf you like a torrent. The high peaks will be broken, the mountains will sever, and night be upon all. The valleys and hills will be strewn with your corpses, the rocks will run with your blood, the plain will drink it, and the vultures feast on your flesh. Woe unto you all, I say, that call good evil, and evil good!”

The invective continued. It enveloped the world. Everything was to be destroyed. Presently it subsided; the voice of the prophet sank lower; his eyes sought the sky, the pupils dilated; and the dream of his nation, the triumphant future, the sanctification of the faithful, the magnificence that was to be, poured rapturously from his lips.

“The whole land will glow with glory. The sky will be a rose in bloom. The meadows will rejoice, and the earth will be filled with men and maidens singing and kneeling to Thee, Immanuel, whom I await.”

The vision would have expanded, perhaps, but the chain that bound him was loosed, sinewy arms were dragging him away. As he went, he glared up again at Herodias. His face had lost its beatitude.

“You will be stripped of your purple, Jezebel; your diadem will be trodden under foot. The pains of a woman in travail will be as joys unto yours. There will be not enough stones to throw at you, and the abomination of your lust will bellow, Accursed, even beyond the tomb.”

The anathema faded in the distance. The Scribes consulted between their teeth. By the Pharisees Antipas was blamed. A merchant from Hippos did not understand, and the Law was explained. That a man should marry his brother’s wife was a duty, only in this instance it had not occurred to the brother to die beforehand. Then, again, by her first husband Herodias had a child, and in that was the abomination.

The merchant did not wholly grasp the distinction, but he nodded as though he had.

“There was a child, was there?”

A captain of the garrison answered: “A girl, Salomè.”

He said nothing further, but the merchant could see that his mouth watered at the thought of her.

The crowd had become very dense. Suddenly a trumpet blared. At the gate was Pontius Pilate. On his head was a high and dazzling helmet. His tunic was short, open at the neck. His legs were bare. He was shod with shoes that left the toes exposed. From his cuirass a gorgon’s head had, in deference to local prejudice, been effaced; in its stead were scrolls and thunderbolts. From the belt rows of straps, embroidered and fringed, fell nearly to the knee. He held his head in the air. His features were excellent, and his beard hung in rows of short overlapping curls.

Behind him was his body-guard. Before him Antipas stood, welcoming the Roman in Greek.

In the sky now were the advancing steps of night; in crevices of the basalt the leaves of the baaras weed had begun to flicker. It was time for the festival to begin; and, preceding the guests, Antipas passed into a hall beyond.

It was oblong, curved at the ends, and so vast that the roof was vague. On the walls were slabs of different colors, marble spotted like the skin of serpents, and onyx flecked with violet. On two sides were galleries supported by columns of sandstone. A third gallery formed a semicircle. Opposite, at the further end, on a dais, was the table of the tetrarch.

Antipas faced the assemblage. At his left was the procurator, at his right the emir of Tadmor. Curtains were looped on either side. Above were panels; they separated, and flowers fell. On a little

stool next to the couch on which the emir lay was a beautiful boy with curly hair. The couch of the procurator was covered with a dim Babylonian shawl. That of the tetrarch was of ivory incrustated with gold. All three were cushioned.

As the guests entered they were sprinkled with perfume. Throughout the length of the hall other tables extended, and at these they found seats and food: Syrian radishes, melons from the oases near the Oxus, white olives from Bethany, honey from Capharnahum, and the little onions of Ascalon. There were candelabra everywhere, liquids cooled with snow, cheeses big as millstones, chunks of fat in wooden bowls, and behind the tables, slaves with copper platters. On the platters were quarters of red beef, breams swimming in grease, and sunbirds with their plumage on. In the semicircular gallery musicians played, three notes, constantly repeated.

The tetrarch's table was spread with a cloth of byssus striped with Laconian green. On it were jars of murrha filled with balsam, Sidonian goblets of colored glass, jasper amphoræ, and water-melons from Egypt. Before the procurator was a dish of oysters, lampreys, and boned barbels, mixed well together, flavored with cinnamon and assafœtida; mashed grasshoppers baked in saffron; and a roasted boar, the legs curled inward, the eyes half-closed. The emir ate abundantly of heron's eggs whipped with wine into an amber foam. When his fingers were soiled, he wiped them in the curls of the beautiful boy who sat near by.

The smell of food filled the hall, mounted to the roof. The atmosphere was that of a bath, and the wines were heady. Already discussions had arisen. A mountaineer and a Galilean skiffsman had been dragged away, the one senseless, the other with features indistinguishable and masked in blood. It was a great festival, and the tetrarch was entertaining, as only he could, his friends, his enemies, and whoever chanced that way.

"As a child he rubbed his body with the leaves of the cnyza, which is a preservative of chastity." It was a little man with restless eyes and a very long white beard detailing the virtues of Iohanan. "But," he added, "he must have found cold water better."

His neighbors laughed. One pounded the table.

"Jeshua – " he began, but everyone was talking at once.

"Jeshua – " he continued; yet, as no one would listen, he turned to a passing eunuch and caught him by the arm – "Jeshua does more; he works miracles, and not with the cnyza either."

The eunuch eluded him and escaped. However, he would not be balked; he stood up and, through the din, he shouted at the little man:

"Baba Barbulah, I tell you he is the Messiah!"

His voice was so loud it dominated the hubbub, and suddenly the hubbub ceased.

From the dais Pontius Pilate listened indifferently. Antipas held his hands behind his ears that he might hear the better. The emir paid no attention at all. On his head was a conical turban; about it were loops of sapphire and coils of pearl. He wore a vest with scant sleeves that reached to the knuckles, and trousers that overhung the instep and fell in wide wrinkles on his feet; both were of leopard-skin. Over the vest was a sleeveless tunic, clasped at the shoulders and girt at the waist. His hair was long, plentifully oiled; his beard was bushy, blue-black, and specked with silver.

Mary had approached. From the lessening waist to the slender feet her dress opened at either side. Beneath was a chemise of transparent Bactrianian tissue. From girdle to armpits were little clasps; on her ankles, bands; and above the elbow, on her bare white arm, two circlets of emeralds from the mines of Djebel Zabur.

The emir spoke to her. She listened with a glimpse of the most beautiful teeth in the world. He put out a hand tentatively and touched her: the tissue of her garment crackled and emitted sparks. He raised a goblet to her. The wine it held was yellower than the marigold. She brushed it with her lips; he drank it off, then, refreshed, he looked her up and down.

In one hand she held a cup of horn, narrower at the top than at the end; in it were dice made of the knee-joints of gazelles, and these she rattled in his beard.

“That beautiful Sultan, will he play?”

With an ochre-tipped finger she pointed at the turban on his head. The eyes of the emir vacillated. He undid a string of gems and placed them on the table's edge. Mary unclasped a coil of emeralds and rattled the dice again. She held the cup high up, then spilled the contents out.

“Ashtaroth!” the emir cried. He had won.

Mary leaned forward, fawned upon his breast, and gazed into his face. Her breath had the fragrance of his own oasis, her lips were moist as the pomegranate's pulp, her teeth as keen as his own desire.

“No, beautiful Sultan, it is I.” With the back of her hand she disturbed the dice. “I am Ashtaroth, am I not?”

Questioningly the emir explored the unfathomable eyes that gazed into his.

On their surface floated an acquiescence to the tacit offer of his own. Then he nodded, and Mary turned and gathered the jewels from the cloth of byssus where they lay.

“I tell you he is the Messiah!” It was the angry disputant shouting at the little man.

“Who is? What are you talking about?”

Though the hubbub had ceased, throughout the hall were the mutterings of dogs disturbed.

“Jeshua,” the disputant answered; “Jeshua the Nazarene.”

A Pharisee, very vexed, his bonnet tottering, gnashed back: “The Messiah will uphold the law; this Nazarene attacks it.”

A Scribe interrupted: “Many things are to distinguish his advent. The light of the sun will be increased a hundredfold, the orchards will bear fruit a thousand times more abundantly. Death will be forgotten, joy will be universal, Elijah will return.”

“But he has!”

Antipas started. The Scribe trembled with rage. But the throng had caught the name of Elijah, and knew to whom the disputant referred – a man in tattered furs whom a few hours before they had seen dragged away by a negro naked to the waist, and some one shouted:

“Iohanan is Elijah.”

Baba Barbulah stood up and turned to whence the voice had come:

“In the footprints of the Anointed impudence shall increase, and the face of the generation shall be as the face of a dog. It may be,” he added, significantly – “it may be that you speak the truth.”

The sarcasm was lost. The musicians in the gallery, who had been playing on flute and timbrel, began now on the psalteron and the native sambuca. Behind was a row of lute-players; but most in view was a trignon, an immense Egyptian harp, at which with nimble fingers a fair girl plucked.

In the shadow Herodias leaned. At a signal from her the musicians attacked the prelude of a Syrian dance, and in the midst of the assemblage a figure veiled from head to foot suddenly appeared. For a moment it stood very still; then the veil fell of itself, and from the garrison a shout went up:

“Salomè! Salomè!”

Her hair, after an archaic Chanaanite fashion, was arranged in the form of a tower. Her high bosom was wound about with protecting bands. Her waist was bare. She wore long pink drawers of silk, and for girdle she had the blue buds of the lotus, which are symbols of virginity. She was young and exquisitely formed. In her face you read strange records, and on her lips were promises as rare. Her eyes were tortoise-shell, her hair was black as guilt.

The prelude had ceased, the movement quickened. With a gesture of abandonment the girl threw her head back, and, her arms extended, she fluttered like a butterfly on a rose. She ran forward. The sambuca rang quicker, the harp quicker yet. She threw herself to one side, then to the other, her hips swaying as she moved. The buds at her girdle fell one by one; she was dancing on

flowers, her hips still swaying, her waist advancing and retreating to the shiver of the harp. She was elusive as dream, subtle as love; she intoxicated and entranced; and finally, as she threw herself on her hands, her feet, first in the air and then slowly descending, touched the ground, while her body straightened like a reed, there was a long growl of unsatisfied content.

She was kneeling now before the dais. Pilate compared her to Bathylle, a mime whom he had applauded at Rome. The tetrarch was purple; he gnawed his under lip. For the moment he forgot everything he should have remembered – the presence of his guests, the stains of his household, his wife even, whose daughter this girl was – and in a gust of passion he half rose from his couch.

“Come to me,” he cried. “But come to me, and ask whatever you will.”

Salomè hesitated and pouted, the point of her tongue protruding between her lips.

“Come to me,” he pleaded; “you shall have slaves and palaces and cities; you shall have hills and intervalles. I will give you anything; half my kingdom if you wish.”

There was a tinkle of feet; the girl had gone. In a moment she returned, and balancing herself on one foot, she lisped very sweetly: “I should like by and by to have you give me the head of Iohanan – ” she looked about; in the distance a eunuch was passing, a dish in his hand, and she added, “on a platter.”

Antipas jumped as though a hound under the table had bitten him on the leg. He turned to the procurator, who regarded him indifferently, and to the emir, who was toying with Mary’s agate-nailed hand. He had given his word, however; the people had heard. About his ears the perspiration started; from purple he had grown very gray.

Salomè still stood, balancing herself on one foot, the point of her tongue just visible, while from the gallery beyond, in whose shadows he divined the instigating presence of Herodias, came the grave music of an Hebraic hymn.

“So be it,” he groaned.

The order was given, and a tear trickled down through the paint and furrows of his cheek. On the hall a silence had descended. The guests were waiting, and the throb of the harp accentuated the suspense. Presently there was the clatter of men-at-arms, and a negro, naked to the waist, appeared, an axe in one hand, the head of the prophet in the other.

He presented it deferentially to Antipas, who motioned it away, his face averted. Salomè smiled. She took it, and then, while she resumed her veil, she put it down before the emir, who eyed it with the air of one that has seen many another object such as that.

But in a moment the veil was adjusted, and with the trophy the girl disappeared.

The harp meanwhile had ceased to sob, the guests were departing; already the procurator had gone. The emir looked about for Mary, but she also had departed; and, with the expectation, perhaps, of finding her without, he too got up and left the hall.

Antipas was alone. Through the lattice at his side he could see the baaras in the basalt emitting its firefly sparks of flame. From an adjacent corridor came the discreet click-clack of a sandal, and in a moment the head of the prophet was placed on the table at which he lay. The tetrarch leaned over and gazed into the unclosed eyes. They were haggard and dilated, and they seemed to curse.

He put his hand to his face and tried to think – to forget rather, and not to remember; but his ears were charged with rustlings that extended indefinitely and lost themselves in the future; his mind peopled itself with phantoms of the past. Perhaps he dozed a little. When he looked up again the head was no longer there, and he told himself that Herodias had thrown it to the swine.

CHAPTER III

In the distance the white and yellow limestone of the mountains rose. Near by was a laughter of flowers, a tumult of green. Just beyond, in a border of sedge and rushes, a lake lay, a mirror to the sky. In the background were the blue and white terraces of Magdala, and about a speaker were clustered a handful of people, a group of laborers and of fishermen.

He was dressed as a rabbi, but he looked like a seer. In his face was the youth of the world, in his eyes the infinite. As he spoke, his words thrilled and his presence allured. "Repent," he was saying; "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And as the resplendent prophecy continued, you would have said that a bird in his heart had burst into song.

A little to one side, in an attitude of amused contempt, a few of the tetrarch's courtiers stood; they were dressed in the Roman fashion, and one, Pandera, a captain of the guard, wore a cuirass that glittered as he laughed. He was young and very handsome. He had white teeth, red lips, a fair skin, a dark beard, and, as he happened to be stationed in the provinces, an acquired sneer. Dear old Rome, how vague it was! And as he jested with his comrades he thought of its delights, and wished himself either back again in the haunts he loved, or else, if he must be separated from them, then, instead of vegetating in a tiresome tetrarchy, he felt that it would be pleasant to be far off somewhere, where the uncouth Britons were, a land which it took a year of adventures to reach; on the banks of the Betis, whence the girls came that charmed the lupanars; in Numidia, where the hunting was good; or in Thrace, where there was blood in plenty – anywhere, in fact, save on the borders of the beautiful lake where he happened to be.

It was but the restlessness of youth, perhaps, that disturbed him so, for in Galilee there were oafs as awkward as any that Britannia could show; there was game in abundance; blood, too, was not as infrequent as it might have been; and as for women, there at his side stood one as appetizing as Rome, Spain even, had produced. He turned to her now, and plucked at his dark beard and showed his white teeth; he had caught a phrase of the rabbi in which the latter had mentioned the kingdoms of the earth, and the phrase amused him.

"I like that," he said. "What does he know about the kingdoms of the earth? Mary, I wager what you will that he has never been two leagues from where he stands. Let's ask and see."

But Mary did not seem to hear. She was engrossed in the rabbi, and Pandera had to tug at her sleeve before she consented to return to a life in which he seemingly had a part.

"What do you say?" he asked.

Mary shook her head. She had the air of one whose mind is elsewhere. Into her face a vacancy had come; she seemed incapable of reply; and as the guardsman scrutinized her it occurred to him that she might be on the point of having an attack of that catalepsy to which he knew her to be subject. But immediately she reassured him.

"Come, let us go."

And, the guardsman at her side, the others in her train, she ascended the little hill on which her castle was, and where the midday meal awaited.

It was a charming residence. Built quadrangularwise, the court held a fountain which was serviceable to those that wished to bathe. The roof was a garden. The interior façade was of teak wood, carved and colored; the frontal was of stone. Seen from the exterior it looked the fortress of some umbrageous prince, but in the courtyard reigned the seduction of a woman in love. From without it menaced, within it soothed.

Her title to it was a matter of doubt. According to Pandera, who at the mess-table at Tiberias had boasted his possession of her confidence, it was a heritage from her father. Others declared that it had been given her by her earliest lover, an old man who since had passed away. Yet, after all, no one cared. She kept open house; the tetrarch held her in high esteem; she was attached to

the person of the tetrarch's wife; only a little before, the emir of Tadmor had made a circuitous journey to visit her; Vitellius, the governor of the province, had stopped time and again beneath her roof; and – and here was the point – to see her was to acquire a new conception of beauty. Of human flowers she was the most fair.

Yet now, during the meal that followed, Mary, the toast of the tetrarchy, she whose wit and brilliance had been echoed even in Rome, wrapped herself in a mantle of silence. The guardsman jested in vain. To the others she paid as much attention as the sun does to a torch; and when at last Pandera, annoyed, perhaps, at her disregard of a quip of his, attempted to whisper in her ear, she left the room.

The nausea of the hour may have affected her, for presently, as she threw herself on her great couch, her thoughts forsook the present and went back into the past, her childhood returned, and faces that she had loved reappeared and smiled. Her father, for instance, Theudas, who had been satrap of Syria, and her mother, Eucharis, a descendant of former kings.

But of these her memories were slight – they had died when she was still very young – and in their place came her sister, Martha, kind of heart and quick of temper, obdurate, indulgent, and continually perplexed; Simon, Martha's husband, a Libyan, born in Cyrene, called by many the Leper because of a former whiteness of his skin, a whiteness which had long since vanished, for he was brown as a date; Eleazer, her brother, younger than herself, a delicate boy with blue pathetic eyes; and with them came the delight of Bethany, that lovely village on the oriental slope of the Mount of Olives, where the rich of Jerusalem had their villas, and where her girlhood had been passed.

From the lattice at which she used to sit she could see the wide white road begin its descent to the Jordan, a stretch of almond trees and oleanders; and just beyond, in a woody hollow, a little house in which Saphôrah lived – a woman who came from no one knew where, and to whom Martha had forbidden her to speak.

She could see her still, a gaunt, gray creature, with projecting cheek-bones, a skin of brick, and a low, insinuating voice. The fascination which she had exercised over her partook both of wonder and of fear, for it was rumored that she was a sorceress, and as old as the world. To Mary, who was then barely nubile, and inquisitive as only fanciful children are, she manifested a great affection, enticing her to her dwelling with little cakes that were sweet to the tooth and fabulous tales that stirred the heart: the story of Stratonice and Combabus, for instance, which Mary did not in the least understand, but which seemed to her intensely sad.

"And then what?" she would ask when the tale was done; and the woman would tell her of Ninus and Semiramis, of Sennachereb, of Sardanapalus, Belsarazzur, of Dagon, the fish-god of Philistia, by whom Goliath swore and in whose temple Samson died, or of Sargon, who, placed by his mother in an ark of rushes, was set adrift in the Euphrates, yet, happily discovered by a water-carrier, afterwards became a leader of men.

"Why, that was Moses!" the child would exclaim.

"No, no," the woman invariably answered, "it was Sargon."

But that which pleased Mary more highly even than these tales were the legends of Hither Asia, the wonderlands of Babylon, and particularly the story of the creation, for always the human mind has wished to read the book of God.

"Where did they say the world came from?" she would ask.

And Saphôrah, drawing a long breath, would answer: "Once all was darkness and water. In this chaos lived strange animals, and men with two wings, and others with four wings and two faces. Some had the thighs of goats, some had horns, and some had horses' feet, or were formed behind like a horse and in front like a man; there were bulls with human faces, and men with the heads of dogs, and other animals of human shape with fins like fishes, and fishes like sirens, and

dragons, and creeping things, and serpents, and fierce creatures, the images of which are preserved in the temple of Bel.

“Over all these ruled the great mother, Um Uruk. But Bel, whom your people call Baal, divided the darkness and clove the woman asunder. Of one part he made the earth, and of the other the sun, the moon, the planets. He drew off the water, apportioned it to the land, and prepared and arranged the world. The creatures on it could not endure the light of day and became extinct.

“Now when Bel saw the land fruitful yet uninhabited, he cut off his head and made one of the gods mingle the blood which flowed from it with earth and form therewith men and animals that could endure the sun. Presently Chaldæa was plentifully populated, but the inhabitants lived like animals, without order or rule. Then there appeared to them from the sea a monster of the name of Yan. Its body was that of a fish, but under its head another head was attached, and on its fins were feet, and its voice was that of a man. Its image is still preserved. It came at morning, passed the day, and taught language and science, the harvesting of seeds and of fruits, the rules for the boundaries of land, the mode of building cities and temples, arts and writing and all that pertains to civilized life, and for four hundred and thirty-two thousand years the world went very well.

“Then in a dream Bel revealed to Xisuthrus that there would be a great storm, and men would be destroyed. He bade him bury in Sepharvaim, the city of the sun, all the ancient, mediæval, and modern records, and build a ship and embark in it with his kindred and his nearest friends. He was also to take food and drink into the ship, and pairs of all creatures winged and four-footed.

“Xisuthrus did as he was bidden, and from the ends of heaven the storm began to blow. Bin thundered; Nebo, the Revealer, came forth; Nergal, the Destroyer, overthrew; and Adar, the Sublime, swept in his brightness across the earth. The storm devoured the nations, it lapped the sky, turned the land into an ocean, and destroyed everything that lived. Even the gods were afraid. They sought refuge in the heaven of Anu, sovereign of the upper realms. As hounds draw in their tails, they seated themselves on their thrones, and to them Mylitta, the great goddess, spake: ‘The world has turned from me, and ruin I have proclaimed.’ She wept, and the gods on their thrones wept with her.

“On the seventh day Xisuthrus perceived that the storm had abated and that the sea had begun to fall. He sent out a dove, it returned; next, a swallow, which also returned, but with mud on its feet; and again, a raven, which saw the corpses in the water and ate them, and returned no more. Then the boat was stayed and settled upon Mount Nasir. Xisuthrus went out and worshipped the recovered earth. When his companions went in search of him he had disappeared, but his voice called to them saying that for his piety he had been carried away; that he was dwelling among the gods; and that they were to return to Sepharvaim and dig up the books and give them to mankind. Which they did, and erected many cities and temples, and rebuilt Babylon and Mylitta’s shrine.”

“It is simpler in Genesis,” Mary said, the first time she heard this marvellous tale. For to her, as to Martha and Eleazer, the khazzan, the teacher of the synagogue, had read from the great square letters in which the Pentateuch was written another account of the commingling of Chaos and of Light.

At the mention of the sacred canon, Sephôrah would smile with that indulgence which wisdom brings, and smooth her scanty plaits, and draw the back of her hand across her mouth.

“Burned on tiles in the land of the magi are the records of a million years. In the unpolluted tombs of Osorapi the history of life and of time is written on the cerements of kings. Where the bells ring at the neck of the camels of Iran is a stretch of columns on which are inscribed the words of those that lived in Paradise. On a wall of the temple of Bel are the chronicles of creation; in the palace of Assurbanipal, the narrative of the flood. It is from these lands and monuments the Torah comes; its verses are made of their memories; it gathered whatever it found, and overlooked the essential, immortal life.”

And Sephôrah added in a whisper, “For we are descended from gods, and immortal as they.”

The khazzan had disclosed to Mary no such prospect as that. To him as to all orthodox expounders of the Law man was essentially evanescent; he lived his little day and disappeared forever. God alone was immortal, and an immortal being would be God. The contrary beliefs of the Egyptians and the Aryans were to them abominations, and the spiritualistic doctrine inaugurated by Juda Maccabæus and accepted by the Pharisees, an impiety. The Pentateuch had not a word on the subject. Moses had expressly declared that secret things belong to the Lord, and only visible things to man. The prophets had indeed foretold a terrestrial immortality, but that immortality was the immortality of a nation; and the realization of their prophecy the entire people awaited. Apart from that there was only Sheol, a sombre region of the under-earth, to which the dead descended, and there remained without consciousness, abandoned by God.

“Immortal!” Mary, with great wondering eyes, would echo. “Immortal!”

“Yes; but to become so,” Sephôrah replied, “you must worship at another shrine.”

“Where is it?”

Sephôrah answered evasively. Mary would find it in time – when the spring came, perhaps; and meanwhile she had a word or two to say of Baal to such effect even that Mary questioned the khazzan.

“However great the god of the Gentiles has been imagined,” the khazzan announced, “he is bounded by the earth and the sky. His feet may touch the one, his head the other, but of nature he is a part, and, to the Eternal, nature is not even a garment, it is a substance He made, and which He can remould at will. It is not in nature, it is in light, He is: in the burning bush in which He revealed Himself; in the stake at which Isaac would have died; in the lightning in which the Law was declared, the column of fire, the flame of the sacrifices, and the gleaming throne in which Isaiah saw Him sit – it is there that He is, and His shadow is the sun.”

Of this Mary repeated the substance to her friend, and Sephôrah mused.

“No,” she said at last – “no, he is not in light, but in the desert where nature is absent, and where the world has ceased to be. The threats of a land that never smiled are reflected in his face. The sight of him is death. No, Baal is the sun-god. His eyes fecundate.”

And during the succeeding months Sephôrah entertained Mary with Assyrian annals and Egyptian lore. She told her more of Baal, whose temple was in Babylon, and of Baaltis, who reigned at Ascalon. She told her of the women who wept for Tammuz, and explained the reason of their tears. She told her of the union of Ptah, the unbegotten begetter of the first beginning, and of Neith, mother of the sun; of the holy incest of Isis and Osiris; and of Luz, called by the patriarchs Bethel, the House of God, the foothold of a straight stairway which messengers ceaselessly ascended and descended, and at whose summit the Elohim sat.

She told her of these things, of others as well; and now and then in the telling of them a fat little man with beady eyes would wander in, the smell of garlic about him, and stare at Mary’s lips. His name was Pappus; by Sephôrah he was treated with great respect, and Mary learned that he was rich and knew that Sephôrah was poor.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.