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NOTABLE WOMEN

OF

OLDEN TIME.

WRITTEN FOR THE AMERICAN SUNDAY-SCHOOL UNION.

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THE WIFE—SARAH.

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ithin a few centuries after the flood, while some who had witnessed the sin and the destruction of the antediluvian world were still living, Jehovah saw fit, in accordance with his designs of eternal wisdom, to separate Abraham from his brethren, calling upon him to leave the land of his birth and go out into a strange land, to dwell in a far country. He was to pass the rest of his days as a sojourner in a land which should be thereafter given to a people yet unborn,—to a nation which was to descend from him.

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Abraham was a lineal descendant of Shem, who was doubtless still living while "the father of Abraham yet abode with his kindred in the land of the Chaldees;" and from the lips of his venerable progenitor, Abraham himself may have first received the knowledge of the true God, and have learned lessons of wisdom and obedience, as he sat at his feet. Shem may have conversed with Methuselah; and Methuselah must have known Adam; and from Adam, Methuselah may have heard that history of the creation and fall, which he narrated to Shem, and which Shem may have transmitted to Abraham; and the history of the world would be thus remembered as the traditional recollections of a family, and repeated as the familiar remembrances of a single household.

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Tales of the loveliness of Eden,—of the glories of the creation,—of the blessedness of the primeval state,—of the days before the fall; remembrances of the "mother of all living" in the days of her holiness, when she was as beautiful as the world created for her home, in all the dewy sweetness of the morning of its existence,—of the wisdom of man before he yielded to the voice of temptation, when authority was enthroned upon his brow, and all the tribes of the lower creation did him homage;—of the good spirits who watched over to minister unto and bless them;—of those dark, unholy and accursed ones, who came to tempt, betray and destroy them,—were recounted as events of which those who described them had been the witnesses. And from the remembrances thus preserved and transmitted by tradition, each generation obscuring or exaggerating them, have descended what we call fables of antiquity,—great facts, now dimly remembered and darkly presented, as shadowed over by the mists of long ages.

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How must the hearts of the descendants of Shem have thrilled as they heard from him the history of by-gone times—of a world which had passed away! How much had the great patriarch of his race, himself, beheld? He had seen the glory and the beauty of the world before the flood. It was cursed for the sin of man, in the day of his fall—but slowly, as we measure time, do the woes denounced by God often take effect, and, though excluded from Eden, the first pair may have seen little change pass over the face of the earth. The consummation of this curse may have been the deluge; and those who dwelt on the earth, before this calamity swept it with its destroying wing, may have seen it in much of its original beauty; while those who outlived that event

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witnessed a wonderful change.

From that frail fabric, the ark, which proved the second cradle of the race, Shem had beheld a world submerged,—a race swept off by the floods of Almighty wrath. He had heard the shrieks of the drowning, the vain prayer of those who had scoffed the threatened vengeance, the fruitless appeal of those who had long rejected mercy. As the waves bore up his frail vessel, he had seen the black and sullen waters settle over temples, cities and palaces; and he had gazed until he could behold but one dark expanse of water, in whose turbid depths were buried all the families of the earth—save one.

Those he had loved and honoured, and much which, perhaps, he had envied and coveted—the pride, the glory, the beauty of earth—all had passed away. And after the waters subsided, and the ark had found a resting-place, what a deep and sad solemnity must have mingled with the joy for their preservation. [12]

How strange the aspect the world presented! How must the survivors have recalled past scenes and faces, to be seen no more! How much they must have longed to recognise old familiar places,—the Eden of Adam and Eve,—the graves in which they had been laid! For doubtless Seth and his descendants still remained with their first parents, while Cain went out from their presence and built a city in some place remote. The earth which Noah and his descendants re-peopled was one vast grave; and what wonder that those who built above a race entombed, should mingle fancy with tradition, and imagine that the buried cities and habitations were yet inhabited by the accursed and unholy. Such have been the fancies of those who darkly remembered the flood; and as the wind swept through the caverns of the earth, the superstitious might still imagine that they heard the voices or the shrieks of the spirits imprisoned within. [13]

Shem seems to have far exceeded his brothers in true piety, and the knowledge of Jehovah was for many generations preserved among his descendants, while few or none of them ever sank into those deep superstitions which debased the children of Ham. And it is beautiful to remark, that the filial piety which so pre-eminently marked him has ever been a prominent trait among all nations descended from him. Thus receiving his impressions of the power, the truth, the awful justice of Jehovah, from one well fitted to convey them,—and taught the certain fulfilment of promises and of threats,—Abraham was early inspired with that deep reverential and yet filial love, that entire confidence, which led to the trusting obedience which distinguished his character. [14]

Yet, from his very piety, sad must it have been when the command came to leave the plains of Mesopotamia, and go out a stranger and a pilgrim into distant lands, to become a dweller among those who were fast apostatizing from the true faith. "But by faith he obeyed," and by his obedience he has given us an example and illustration of faith, which has been held forth through all succeeding ages. To be the child of Abraham, to walk as he walked, is, after the lapse of thousands of years, the characteristic of the true worshipper of God.

Guided by an Omniscient hand, trusting in an Almighty power, cheered by that mysterious promise, which, as a star of hope shining in the hour of deepest darkness, still rose to higher brightness as it guided the long line of patriarchs, kings, and prophets, until it settled over the manger of Bethlehem, and was lost in the full glory of the Sun of righteousness,—Abraham girded his loins and prepared for a departure to far distant lands. [15]

At first, attended by his father and brother, he sojourned with them in Haran; and the family pitched their tents in that spot which was to become in future ages the battle-ground of nations, when the proud eagle of imperial Rome was trailed in the dust, and her warriors and her nobles fell before their fiercer foes. Long ages have intervened since the tents of this Syrian family were pitched by the side of the waters of Charan; and midway between their days and ours, were these waters discoloured with the blood of those who fell in the battle of Charae, so disastrous to Rome, ever haughty, and then exulting in the height of her prosperity. A few wandering shepherds now lead their flocks in the plain in which Sarah and Abraham dwelt, and where Cassius and his legions fell. But a short sojourn was permitted Abraham here. "Arise and depart, for this is not your rest"—and again he listened to the command from above, and gathered his flocks and servants, and girded his loins, and set his face towards the land promised to him, and to his seed after him. And now he left his father and his brethren, and went with his own family, the head of his house, the future patriarch of his race. [16]

Yet he was not alone. The wife of his youth was by his side. In all his wanderings, in all his cares, there was one with him to participate in his joys and to alleviate his sorrows. With him and for him, his wife forsook home, kindred and country. We doubt not that she too shared the faith of Abraham; that she too trusted and loved and worshipped the God of Abraham, and of Shem, and of Noah. Like Abraham, a descendant of Shem,—like him too, she had been trained in the worship of Jehovah. Yet to the faith of the true believer, there was added the strong affection of the wife; and while Abraham went out obeying God, Sarah followed, trusting God indeed, but leaning still upon her husband. In all her future life, she is presented to us the wife; devoted, affectionate, submissive; loving her husband with a true affection, and honouring him by a due deference. [17]

With a beauty that fascinated kings, preserving the charms of youth to the advanced period of her life, she still lived but for her husband; and when even the faith of Abraham failed, and he withdrew from the wife the protection of the husband, and said, "She is my sister," Sarah appears to have acquiesced in a deceit so unworthy of her husband and of herself, merely to insure his

safety among the lawless tribes around them.

As we read the story of Abraham's wife, we catch glimpses of ages and nations that were hoar with antiquity, and had passed away when our ancient historians began the record of the past. Nation after nation had perished and been forgotten before the profane historian began his annals. Yet childless, still trusting in the promise of Jehovah, Abraham wandered for many years through the land which was to be given to him, and his seed after him. Now pitching his tent in Moreh; then building his altar at Bethel; then driven by famine into Egypt; then returning to his altar at Bethel,—and there separating from his nephew Lot, because "the land could not bear" both, he fixes his abode in Hebron. [18]

No pictures of pastoral life are more beautiful than those presented in Genesis; and while we contemplate the character of Abraham, we catch occasional glimpses of his household, and of the manners of his age. We see him exercising forbearance and relinquishing the rights of a superior, that there might be no strife between him and his too worldly relative. We see him leading out his own hand as a prince, to rescue that same relative,—who, tempted by the promise of large wealth, had chosen a location full of dangers,—and, in the hour of victory, refusing all spoil and showing all honour to the priest of the most high God. [19]

Again he is before us, sitting in his tent in the heat of the day, and hastening to receive strangers,—"thus entertaining angels unawares,"—and then interceding for that city doomed to destruction for the wickedness of the dwellers therein.

And again he appears as the prince, the patriarch, the head of his own family, and high in honour with those around him, ever observing all the decorum and proprieties of oriental life. We see him, too, as one who walked with God; as the priest of his household, presenting the morning and the evening sacrifice; as holding high communion with God in the hours of darkness; entering into that covenant which is still pleaded by those who claim the promise, "I will be a God to thee, and to thy seed after thee." [20]

This promise of a seed, from which was to spring a great nation, "like to the stars of heaven in number," was frequently repeated, yet still deferred. Youth, manhood, middle age, all had passed, and still no child blest the tents of Sarah; and while Abraham still believed, and it "was accounted to him for righteousness," Sarah seems to have felt that not upon her was to be conferred the distinction of becoming the mother of the promised seed. With the warm impulse of the woman, she sacrificed the feelings of the wife and the instincts of the heart, to promote what she doubtless believed to be the plan of God and the happiness of Abraham. There is a deficiency of faith as much to be manifested in the forestalling the plans of Providence as in the denial of the promises of God: and while Abraham still trusted and waited the fulfilment of the promise, Sarah sought, by her own device, to accomplish prophecy and insure the blessing. [21]

In accordance with the usages of those around her, she gave her handmaid to her husband to be his wife, "that their children might bless her age." She doubtless felt herself strong enough in love to Abraham and to Hagar to believe that her affection would embrace their children. But when the trial came, and all the instincts of the heart, all the feelings of the wife revolted, she proved that this violation of a heaven-appointed institution brings only sorrow and strife. Yet there was no alienation between Sarah and Abraham. The wife of his youth was ever dearer to him than the mother of his child. [22]

At length, however, the promise was fulfilled. Sarah became a mother. Many years had passed since she had left the home of her fathers. The days of man were now much abridged, and she was fast approaching the ordinary limit of human life; but we may suppose her cheek was still fair and her brow smooth, and that she still retained much of the beauty of youth.

With a wondering joy, Sarah gazed upon the child so long desired—the child in whose seed "all the nations of the earth" were to be "blessed." And she said, "God hath made me to laugh, so that all who hear shall laugh;" and while those that heard that Sarah "had borne Abraham a son in his old age," wondered at an event so strange, Abraham must have pondered the prophecy which had revealed to him the destiny of his race,—perhaps foreseeing that Star which was to rise in a still distant age, and apprehending, however dimly and faintly, something of the mysterious connection between the birth of the child and the promise given in the hour of the curse—the blending of the fate of his race with the eternal plan of mercy and redemption. [23]

There is an instinct in our natures which leads us to rejoice at a birth; but, could Sarah have foreseen the destiny of her race, tears would have mingled with her smiles. Wonderful has been the past history of that people, strange their present condition, while the future may develop mysteries still more incomprehensible.

In the hour of rejoicing over the new-born babe, past transgression brought forth its legitimate fruits. Sullenness and strife were brooding in the bosoms of the Egyptian bond-woman and her son; and the quiet eye of the mother saw all the danger arising from the jealous hate and rivalry of the first-born of Abraham. [24]

If the decision was stern, it was needful. "Cast out the bond-woman and her child, for her son shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac." Harsh words,—but it is better to dwell peacefully asunder, than together in strife and bitterness. The malignant passions which led Ishmael to mock, might soon be stimulated by the mother to murder,—chafed and irritated as she was by the constant presence of the child who had supplanted her own. From the time of the departure of Hagar from the household of Abraham, peace seems to have rested upon it. Prosperity attended

him. He no longer wandered from place to place. He remained in Hebron, sojourning with Sarah and her child.

Many years passed,—years of peaceful quiet and happiness seldom allotted to such an age,—while they trained their child in the nurture of the true God, and were honoured by the princes around him, who sought to enter into league with him, for they saw that "God blessed him in all that he did." [25]

Once again God saw fit to test the faith of Abraham by calling upon him to offer his son—his only son Isaac, whom he loved—as a sacrifice; and Abraham obeyed the divine command, and thus doing, uttered that prophecy which has thrilled so many souls, "God will himself provide a sacrifice." In this trial, Sarah seems not to have been called to participate. The mother was spared the agony of feeling that her only child was to be offered as a sacrifice—that the hope of her life was to perish.

"Sarah was an hundred and twenty years old, and she died." The dark shadow of death is, sooner or later, to fall upon each household. Abraham seems to have been at a distance—perhaps in the charge of some of his numerous flocks—when he was recalled to Hebron by news of Sarah's death. And he came to mourn over her. The remembrance of her maiden beauty and modesty, the grateful recollection of all her conjugal devotedness, filled his soul. If light and immortality were brought to light in the gospel, still the divine rays were faintly reflected in the former dispensation, and the eye of faith even then penetrated the thick darkness of the grave. [26]

And now, after these long years of promise and waiting, Abraham takes possession of the land which God had given to him and to his seed. He asks, however, but a small portion,—a tomb, a place for his dead,—and a more beautiful description of a scene of mutual deference, of regard for rights and respect for character and position, was never penned than that which records the negotiation between the bereaved patriarch and the children of Heth. With the touch of magic, the whole scene is before us. The bereaved patriarch, courteous in grief, bowing in the presence of the sons of Heth,—the deep respect, the kindly sympathy, manifested by those who, strangers to his religion, felt the claims of his character,—mingled with that deep awe which the visitation of death ever inspires. [27]

The last scene was now over, and Sarah has first taken possession of that home to which she was to be followed by her husband and their descendants. One by one they take their places by her side,—unwelcomed, unquestioned,—

"Where none have saluted and none have replied,"—

and yet where all are gathered at last. We see her not as a sister or a daughter. She is not known to us in the house of her father. Sarah is only presented to us as the wife of Abraham. And as a wife the apostle has held her up to her own sex as a model and example. "Even as Sarah obeyed her husband, calling him lord,"—exclaims the apostle, exhorting the wife to due deference. The deep, fervent affection of the heart led to that outward manifestation of honour so beautiful and becoming; and as the only love which can be enduring is that which is founded on respect, so it is the highest happiness of the wife to be able truly to honour him whom she is bound to love and obey. [28]

When the heads of a household are thus united in warm affection and mutual respect, the influence will pervade the whole circle, and the family of Abraham presented a beautiful picture of such a household. The numerous members composing a large family were governed by one who provided for their sustenance, led them forth for the defence of rights, or the redress of injuries, or the rescue of the captive; and who officiated as the priest as well as ruler of his household. In such a community, the character of the head would be impressed upon the whole people; and it was with obvious meaning that Jehovah exclaimed, "I know him that he will command his household after him." It was by example that admonition was made availing. And the wife was ever ready, with her ardent and trusting love, to aid and co-operate. Hastening, when he welcomed the stranger, to prepare the feast, she was ever ready to receive his guests and add her efforts to his hospitality. [29]

Hatred, strife, and mutual alienation so often cloud over the unison of wedded life, and cause its sun to set in darkness, that few spectacles can be presented more beautiful or more delightful than the old age of wedded life, soothed by true affection and mutual kindness. It is more touching than the glow of youthful passion. It proclaims the presence of high moral worth. It is never found in the habitations of the unholy. The love which thus survives the glow of youth, which bears the storms and the trials of life, must be founded on truth, on unimpassioned esteem, on approved integrity; and those alone who love God supremely, love each other unselfishly. [30]

While Sarah honoured her husband, she too was treated with proper deference. Her counsels were ever heeded, her voice had its due influence, and he still deferred to her wishes. It is beautiful to note the increasing estimation in which she is held. Sarai, "the mistress," betokened her station as the head of a household; and as years brought honours, and an enlarged sphere of duty, and a more elevated position among the people around them, Sarai was changed into Sarah—*my lady*. Her husband, in addressing the former Sarai as Sarah, "my lady," gracefully returned the honour she bestowed when she called him "lord." By such manifestation of mutual respect and love, the chain of family affection is kept bright. [31]

As the household of Abraham was the household of faith, ordained as the model for all ages, it is well to analyze the elements which composed it, and to trace their combined influence. There

was the conjugal union of the true worshippers of Jehovah, animated by the same hopes, governed by the same principles, whose hearts were united in the strong bonds of natural affection. There was the confiding, unfailing affection, the deep, reverential respect, and due obedience of the wife. There was the tender love, protecting care, the unwavering faith, the honourable deference of the husband. The religion of this household was the religion of faith and of obedience,—a religion which led them to forsake all at the command of God, which taught them to rely upon his promises, to fear his threatenings, to plead his grace, to trust his mercy, while it was a religion which led to a due observance of all the relative duties of life, which taught the exercise of that impartial justice, careful benevolence, disinterested kindness, and ready hospitality to those without the family; and of steady love, of affectionate kindness, of sympathetic forbearance to the members of the household within. The family of faith, where faith is pure, will ever be a family of love; and as true piety is the best security for family happiness, so family love is the best nurse for family piety.

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There are many families among us who aim at being families of faith, who profess to walk in the steps of Abraham, to imitate his example. Let such not confine themselves to the manifestation of his peculiar faith, to his trust and dependence alone. Let them walk as he walked before his household, in the fear of God and the love of man, in the careful fulfilment of every relative and social duty, in the daily exemplification of a tender and loving spirit, carefully avoiding or removing all sources of division. Let that piety which unites them to God, be a bond, encircling all and drawing them near to each other.

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By the cultivation of the simple domestic virtues, by the daily, quiet, self-denying trials, by the observance of the thousand decencies, the unaffected proprieties, the unostentatious efforts to bless and comfort,—by the elevating influence of personal example,—by the breathing atmosphere of a holy spirit,—the family is to be made the household of faith, the nursery of the church.

Direct instruction and formal efforts and stated observances are neither to be forgotten nor to be remitted; but these can only be made effectual by the living exemplification of a spirit of love, a life of holiness. It will ever be found true that he who prays most loves most.

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HAGAR—THE WIFE UNLOVED.

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The Hebrew patriarch led his flocks and herds, surrounded by his large household, from Haran to the land of the Canaanites; from thence to that of the Philistines, down into Egypt; wherever so numerous a family and such large flocks could find sustenance—water and herbage. And as he thus sojourned, many of the poor of these lands flocked to him for employment and support; and while he bought the services of the parents, the children born in his house became members of his family, were trained as his servants, and were subject to his authority as the master of the household, the prince among his people, the patriarch of his tribe.

And among these was Hagar, the Egyptian. We are not told whether she was born in the house of Abraham, or rescued from those who may have stolen her from her home, or given by her parents to the wealthy and childless Sarai. She was Sarah's handmaid—a relation, according to the customs of the East (almost immutable) nearly as dear as that of a child. She was the personal attendant, the constant companion of her mistress; and by her was doubtless instructed in the principles of the true religion, while she was thus accustomed to the accomplishments and occupations of the age. The tasks of the favourite handmaids of Eastern families are still light. To sit at the feet of her mistress with her embroidery; to cheer her with the simple music of the shepherd's tent; to aid her in those domestic duties to which Sarah gave her own superintendence; to assist in preparing the wool of the flocks for the garments of the family; to watch her tent as she reposed by day, and keep by her side as the camels slowly wandered through the valleys in search of pure streams or more abundant herbage, were probably the occupations and duties of Hagar. [36] [37]

Years thus passed on—and the dark-browed and dark-eyed Egyptian maiden had grown into womanhood, and the freshness of youth, the joyousness of health and early life were her's, while her mistress was passing into age. Sarah no longer hoped to become a mother, and, believing that the promise was not intended for her, she urged Abraham to take another wife, offering for his acceptance her own handmaid, the Egyptian Hagar.

The authority of the mistress of the East over her own establishment is so absolute, the husband so interdicted from all interference, that, although Hagar had passed her youth with Sarah, she may have been hardly noticed by Abraham until Sarah proffered her. According to the usage of the east, Sarah had a right (the right then claimed by the parent) thus to dispose of her handmaid; and a marriage with her master was the highest honour which could be bestowed on Hagar. She was given to Abraham to be his wife, and, the relation was—according to the usage then prevailing—as legal as that sustained by Sarah, although the station was inferior. No injury was intended to Hagar. No higher distinction could have been conferred upon her, and, strong in love to both Hagar and Abraham, Sarah doubtless supposed she might be able to welcome and love their children, though denied offspring of her own. [38]

But such departure from the law, precept, or institution of God, involves a long train of sin and sorrow, no matter what the intention—and the union of Abraham with Hagar was a direct violation of the institution of marriage in all its principles and intentions, and it could not but bring confusion and strife to the tent of the patriarch. [39]

It was merely a marriage of interest and convenience, unhallowed by love. The heart of Abraham never departed from the wife of his youth, nor could Sarah ever have intended to relinquish her hold upon his affection. It is the last claim a woman foregoes. And on the other hand, Hagar could have felt no love for her master, so much her superior in age and station. Unholy pride and rank ambition were all the feelings which such an alliance could awaken in the heart of Hagar. Yet Hagar was the least blameworthy, and, perhaps, not eventually the greatest sufferer. By the customs of society, she had no voice in the disposal of herself. Her heart was never consulted. She was only allowed to receive the husband allotted to her—to acquiesce in the decision of others. [40]

The natural results of such a union followed. The exaltation of Hagar excited her pride and led to arrogance; and when she knew that she should become a mother, her childless mistress was despised.

It is hard to bear contempt from those upon whom we have lavished kindness; to feel that we have exalted those who despise us; and all the indignation of Sarah was roused by the assumption and ingratitude of Hagar; and, with the quick instinct of the woman, she retorted upon her husband, "My wrong be upon thee."

A stranger indifference could not have been manifested than that showed by Abraham towards the youthful wife who should have now received his protection and kindness. "Behold thy handmaid is in thy hands." He recognised no tie—he felt no obligation. What was Hagar, that she should occasion strife between him and the wife of his youth, the partner of his life, the daughter of his own people! [41]

Hagar was from this hour abandoned by Abraham to her mistress. When Sarah resumed the authority belonging to her station, she assumed with it a power never before exercised. Forgetting all the love of past years, all the claims of the present hour upon her kindness and forbearance, she treated the unhappy Hagar with such intolerable harshness, that the wretched woman fled from the face of her mistress and from the tents of her master, and sought refuge in the wilderness.

We can conceive what bitter, despairing thoughts, what a keen sense of injustice and injury may have pressed upon her, as she sat alone by the fountain in the desert. Probably a little spot of green herbage denoted the presence of water, while, all around, lay the sandy, rocky desert. The stars, in the brightness of an oriental night, were looking down on her as she sat alone, her face buried in her hands, unheeded, there to die. Then came the visions of her youth, the remembrances of her childhood, the sound of her mother's voice, the dream of her smile—then the tent of Sarah—then the alliance with her master, the excitement of her pride, the flush of hope, the exultation of a fancied triumph over the childless, but still honoured wife; succeeded by the cold withdrawal of all the kindness of the patriarch, and the entire abandonment of her whom he had taken to his bosom, to the implacable resentment of her former mistress! [42]

The temper of Hagar, the feelings thus excited—dark, sullen, bitter, revengeful—when she fled from all, may have been impressed upon her offspring, and thus marked the future character of her race.

Still, Hagar was not alone. The wanderer was not forgotten. In the hour of darkness and of desolation, there is One nigh even to those who forget him. "And the angel of the Lord found her by the fountain in the wilderness, and he said: Hagar, Sarah's maid, whence camest thou? And whither wouldst thou go?" [43]

She was not addressed as the wife of Abraham. The conventional usage, so opposed to the positive institution, was not recognised and thus hallowed by Him who had established marriage; and while Hagar was pitied, she was reminded of her real condition. "And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress, Sarah. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return unto thy mistress and submit thyself under her hands. And the angel of the Lord said, Thou shalt have a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has heard thy affliction. He shall be a wild man. His hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him—and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me, for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?" implying a recognition of the unexpected interference, protection and blessing of God. [44]

The promises of God are always preceded by his commands, and the faith which clings to the promises is to be tested by the obedience which alone can make them availing. And when the words of the angel came to the desolate soul of the woman in the desert, there were admonition, reproof, and command mingled with promise and blessing. "Return to thy mistress." Return to thy duty, is the first requirement made of those God seeks out.

And Hagar humbled herself and obeyed the voice of the Lord. She returned to her mistress. Trying as it must have been to one so aggrieved, she submitted to her authority, and again became a member of the household of Abraham. Had she disobeyed the angel, she and her child had doubtless perished in the wilderness; but in yielding her proud and arrogant temper, she secured the future blessing to her race, and insured the safety of her child, while her submission and gentleness must have won back Sarah to a kinder temper, to a more forbearing treatment. [45]

After the birth of Ishmael, there intervened years—long years—in which Hagar tasted the bitterest cup ever presented to the lips of woman. A wife unloved, neglected—a mother disregarded—a woman held in bondage by one who had made her a rival—dwelling in the presence of him who had put her from him! Her very presence brought reproach and sorrow to Sarah and Abraham—the violation of the divine institution ever entailing its penalty. [46]

The wife deserted, neglected, whose hopes have been crushed, ever turns to her offspring for comfort and sympathy; and ardent was the love, strong were the ties, which bound the Egyptian mother to the son of the patriarch; and in Ishmael must all the hopes and affections of Hagar have centred. Could she, indeed, have penetrated the future, could she have seen her race, the seed of her son, filling the desert and dwelling as princes; while the seed of Sarah and of Abraham were held, as if in retribution of her own sufferings, in bondage in her own native land,—could she have passed through the intervening ages and seen the children of Ishmael issuing from their desert and setting their feet upon the necks of the proudest and mightiest, imposing their faith upon a world, while they marched forth conquering and to conquer—could she have contrasted the triumphant warriors of Arabia, the caliphs of the east and the west, with the wandering, desolate, persecuted, trodden-down tribes of Israel—the proudest expectations of the woman and the mother would have been all answered. Could she have penetrated the meaning of the words she must have so often pondered, she would have found that the loftiest dreams of the rankest ambition were to be more than realized. [47]

But dimly and faintly must she have apprehended the meaning of the mysterious prophecy, even while she trusted the accompanying promise. As she saw Ishmael, the only child in the tent of the patriarch, and loved by the father, she perhaps allowed herself to hope that he was yet to be the heir, and that in his future honours she was to find a full recompense for all the trials of her blighted youth. [48]

After long years of waiting, Sarah embraced a son, and the event, so joyous to the parents, awoke afresh the bitter remembrances of Hagar, while it roused her to the consciousness of her present lot and of all the injuries inflicted upon her.

In all the trials and sorrows through which she had passed, she had had none to sustain or sympathize with her. Her child remained her only earthly hope; and now she felt that another was to supplant him, and thus disappoint all her expectations.

Her spirit rose in pride and wrath, and she infused her own bitter feelings into the heart of her child. When Isaac was hailed as the heir, while all rejoiced, Hagar and Ishmael mocked both the infant and the aged parents.

Forbearance was no longer safe, and the decision of Sarah was wise, though harsh—yet it was sad to Abraham. Ishmael was still his son—his first-born. He had been ever dear to him; and when the angel of the Lord had again confirmed the promise of a seed in whom all the nations of the earth were to be blessed, he had almost seemed to overlook it as he pleaded for the son of the bond-woman, "Oh that Ishmael might live before thee!" while to Abraham was then confirmed the promise given before the birth of her child to Hagar. There was sorrow and perplexity in the heart of Abraham, but a message from heaven confirmed the decree of Sarah. [49]

The patriarch arose, after a night of conflict and prayer, while the stars were still shining in the heavens, while the flocks lay in stillness around the tents, and before those who had revelled and rejoiced were awake, and called Hagar and her child. Can we not see them in the gray of the morning? The father, the mother, the child,—the patriarch, aged, but not bowed by age, still retaining the vigour of manhood—the boy shy, yet half-defying—the mother! In such an hour, all distinctions of rank and station would be forgotten, and all the feelings of the woman be roused. Then and there Hagar might well forget that she was Sarah's bondmaid, and only remember that she had been Abraham's wife—that she was still Ishmael's mother.

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In that hour must have risen the memory of her wrongs, of her saddened youth, her darkened womanhood—of the selfishness with which he had wedded her; of the heartlessness with which he had deserted her; of her long years of trial and contempt. And her eye might speak reproach, although the lips were closed and there was no voice. Should we not rejoice to believe that the patriarch whispered some regret for the past, and spoke of sorrow and repentance to her whose happiness he had so selfishly sacrificed, even as he consummated his work by casting her out, a homeless exile. Such is the enslaving power of custom, so easily do we blind ourselves to our own delinquencies, that Abraham probably aggravated Hagar's faults while he overlooked her injuries. He saw in her but the spiteful, revengeful handmaid; he forgot that she was an injured wife—a neglected mother.

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Yet no words of reproach, of entreaty, or explanation of the past, or promise for the future, are recorded as having passed between them. He pronounced the decree, and laid upon the bondmaid, and not upon his noble boy, the provision for the journey. She turned from the tents, and thus they parted!

But the connection of Abraham and Hagar had woven a thread into the destiny of nations, still to be traced. She left the patriarch in sorrow, in bitterness of soul; but she went out to found nations, to punish rulers, to establish a long line who should transmit the name of her son and the influence of her character to remotest ages—even to the end of time.

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Accustomed to the wandering life of the desert, and provided for the journey, Abraham probably deemed Hagar competent to guide her steps to a place of safety. But sorrow may have blinded her eyes, or despair made her reckless, and she was lost in the desert. The water was spent in the bottle—tons of gold could not open a fountain in the desert—and she saw her child parched with thirst, "faint and ready to die; and she cast him under one of the shrubs, and went and sat a good way off, as it were a bow-shot, for she said, Let me not see the death of the child; and as she sat over against him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad, and the angel of God called to her out of heaven and said unto her, What aileth thee Hagar? Fear not! For God hath heard the voice of the child where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thy hand, for I will make of him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad to drink." What an inimitable description of a mother's love! What a display of the watchful benevolence of Jehovah!

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In this hour of desolation, when no human aid was near, there was again the Divine interposition, while there was no reproach, no allusion even to that sinful temper which had led to the banishment of both mother and child, and caused them to come here to perish in the wilderness. Blessed be God that he does not suffer the unworthiness of his children to separate them from his love; that in the hour of extremity he is still nigh; that his ear is ever open to hear and his arm ready to save.

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"And God was with the lad: and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer; and he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran." And his mother still dwelt with him; and in all his wanderings, wherever his footsteps were turned, there was her home. There is a touching remembrance of her early life, in the fact that Hagar chose a wife for her son from among the daughters of her own people: "She took him a wife out of the land of Egypt." And from this union have sprung the tribes who still fill the deserts where Hagar sought a refuge. A wild race, dwelling in the presence of all their brethren, whose hand is against every man, while every man's hand is against them.

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Ishmael rose rapidly to rank, and Hagar lived to rejoice in his prosperity. The life which commenced in want, privation and wandering in the wilderness, conducted her to wealth and honour. So dark and inscrutable are the ways of Providence, that at each step we are taught but to seek the path of duty and obey the direction of Heaven.

The children of Ishmael seem to have long preserved the knowledge of Jehovah. Hagar, who had received so many proofs of the being, power, and providence of the God of Abraham, might well instruct her descendants in the principles of the true faith. The race of Ishmael have still preserved the rite which Abraham received as the seal of faith. Often may Hagar have recounted the providences of God—the account she had heard, in the tent of Abraham, of the creation, the fall, the deluge, the re-peopling of the world; and often, in the course of their wandering lives, she may have led her descendants to those deep waters which covered the guilty cities of the plain, and then described them as she knew them before the wrath of God fell upon them.

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The tribes of Ishmael have ever recognised their descent from Abraham; and the instructions of Hagar are preserved as national traditions to this very day, though exaggerated by Eastern fancy, and mingled with wilder romance, as they have been transmitted from one generation to another by the children of Ishmael, who still lead their flocks in the same valleys, and pitch their tents by the same fountains to which Hagar resorted with Ishmael.

Hagar and Ishmael were no more members of Abraham's household, yet the relationship of father and son was ever recognised. Doubtless Abraham imparted of his wealth to his first-born; and as Abraham often sojourned afterwards in Beer-sheba, probably not far from the spot where Hagar and Ishmael so nearly perished, the father and son may have often met; and Isaac and Ishmael may have held kindly intercourse, when the bitter feelings of rivalry and of conscious wrong had subsided. The ties of kindred were still allowed, and Esau sought a wife from the family of his own kindred, as a means of conciliating his father and mother; thus showing that a purer morality and a higher religious feeling were cherished than those among surrounding tribes. And when Abraham died, having attained a full age, his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, both far advanced in years, buried him. The strifes, the bitterness, the hate of early life seem to have been forgotten, and they united in the last offices of filial love and duty. [57]

The son of the bondmaid had attained, during the life of Abraham, a distinction beyond that of the son of the wife; and his immediate descendant rose to wealth and honour, while, if one branch of Isaac's family tasted prosperity, those recognised as the heirs of that mysterious blessing were long known as wanderers, and then despised as slaves. Their long line of descent has run parallel, side by side, distinct, unmingled; recognising a common origin, but never acknowledging a common brotherhood. The oldest nations of the earth,—the one exiled from the land given them, dwelling as outcasts and strangers among all the nations of the earth, yet still separate, apart, a peculiar people; the other living at this day in the deserts where Hagar wandered, and where she fainted—a never-conquered people. And while Assyrian, Greek, and Roman have swept the world and exacted tribute of the nations around them, and other tribes have been swept with the besom of destruction, the sons of Ishmael have still dwelt in the presence of their brethren, ever enforcing, but still refusing to pay tribute—free and wild as the lad who first became an archer in the wilderness. Unconsciously confirming prophecy, and still attesting the truth of a revelation which they contemn and deny,—thus strangely dwelling so different from all other nations,—preserving the initiatory rites and the mystic symbols of the faith of Abraham, the customs and traditions of the age of the patriarch,—these nations dwell distinct, separate from each other and from all other nations, awaiting the day when blindness shall be removed from the eyes of the children of promise, and the descendants of Sarah and of Hagar shall be both gathered with the fold of Christ. [58]

There are Hagars of modern, as well as of ancient days,—of western as of eastern lands. She who is wedded from interest and convenience; she who forms a heartless union from pride and ambition; she who awakes from her dreams of bliss to find herself an unloved, and perhaps to become a deserted wife—all these prove the bitterness of the lot of the Egyptian Hagar. He who has ordained marriage has graciously implanted the affections which are to make it a source of happiness; and those who form this union under other motives and influences run fearful risks. There are many Hagars in the highest ranks of life, and even where the artificial distinctions of society are most highly regarded and carefully recognised. [59]

When youth is wedded to age or sacrificed to decrepitude to promote some State policy, though the victims are not clothed in the garb of the Egyptian slave, but arrayed in the pomp of regal vestments, yet the diamond often rests upon an aching brow, and the pearls press a saddened bosom; and when the holiest of earthly institutions is thus violated, each relation of life is profaned; and polluted streams descend from the highest sources and diffuse their poison through all the ranks of life—through all the gradations of society. [60]

There will still be Hagars—women who marry for a home, or a support; and especially while woman is educated to be helpless—unable to provide for her own wants; or while that prejudice is cherished which leads her to deem useful employment a degradation. [61]

HAGAR'S EXILE.

She fled, with one reproachful look
On him who bade her go,
And scarcely could the patriarch brook
That glance of voiceless wo:
In vain her quivering lips essay'd
His mercy to implore;
Silent the mandate she obey'd,
And then was seen no more.

The burning waste and lonely wild
Received her as she went;
Hopeless, she clasp'd her fainting child,
With thirst and sorrow spent.
And in the wilderness so drear,
She raised her voice on high,
And sent forth that heart-stricken prayer
"Let me not see him die!"

Her beautiful, her only boy,
Her all of hope below;

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So long his father's pride and joy,
 And yet—from *him* the blow!
 Alone she must his head sustain,
 And watch his sinking breath,
 And on his bright brow mark the stain
 Of the destroyer, Death.

"Let me not see him die," and lo!
 The messenger of peace!
 Once more her tears forget to flow,
 Once more her sorrows cease.
 Life, strength, and freedom now are given
 With mighty power to one
 Who from his father's roof was driven,
 And he—the outcast's son.

How often we, like Hagar, mourn,
 When some unlook'd for blight
 Drives us away, no more to turn
 To joys we fancied bright!
 Forced from our idols to retreat,
 And seek the Almighty's care,
 Perchance we are sent forth to meet
 A desert-angel there.



THE PARTIAL AND INTRIGUING MOTHER—REBEKAH.

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fter the departure of Hagar and her son from the tents of Abraham, peace seems to have returned, and it became the abode of filial and parental as well as of conjugal affection. Sarah's days were still prolonged, that she might exercise the duties and enjoy the pleasures of a mother.

The heir of wealth, and the child of love and indulgence, the character of Isaac seems to have been the reverse of his brother, the restless, wandering Ishmael. The one, cast off from the care of the father and taught to rely upon his own energies, early distinguished himself, and became the leader of a band, and a prince among the nations around; while the other, cherished and cared for, was content to dwell in the peaceful enjoyment of wealth and prosperity. Thus do we find that trials are necessary to develop the higher qualities and to call them into action. The truly great and noble, the eminent in talent or usefulness, are never nursed in the bosom of ease.

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Sarah died; and while the bereaved husband felt his loss, the son could not have been insensible. There was a dreary void in the home of the patriarch when the wife and the mother had been laid in the sepulchre. There was no one to fill the place of Sarah—no one to bless their simple meals. She no longer appears to welcome them as they returned from the field or the flock. The tribe is without a mother, the household without a mistress. Many considerations led Abraham to desire the marriage of his son, and he cast around his thoughts for a wife worthy of being the mother of the promised seed, and one who could well fulfil the duties which must devolve upon her as the head of his large household. The people around him would have courted his alliance, and as yet no command from God forbade his forming family ties with the inhabitants of the land. But Abraham too well knew the influence of the wife and the mother, to choose a wife for the child of promise from a race apostate from the religion of Jehovah. He knew the ensnaring influence which would there be brought to bear upon his family, and he resolved to seek a wife for Isaac among his far-distant kindred—those who yet retained the knowledge and clung to the worship of the God of Shem, of Noah, and of Adam. Though far separated from his brethren, yet communications seem to have passed, and Abraham had been told of the enlargement of the family of his brother; and he resolved, not only to seek a wife for his son from among his own kindred, but, while making arrangements for such a marriage, he solemnly guarded against the return of his descendants to the land from whence he had been called.

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Trying as might be the long journey, and uncertain as seemed the issue, no inferior motives were allowed to be put in competition with the perpetuity of the worship and knowledge of God. A connection with any of the families of the Canaanites would have been at once ensnaring to the household of Abraham and injurious in its influence upon the heart of Isaac. Had Isaac married the daughter of an idolater, irreligion and immorality would soon have pervaded the family of the patriarch, and the knowledge of the true God have departed from the earth. Thus the beacon light of nations had been extinguished, and the last altar erected to Jehovah had been broken down: for the other descendants of Shem were fast departing from the God of their fathers,—and if the children of Keturah and Ishmael for a period retained the faith of Abraham, the torch which kindled the fire on their altars was lighted at that which was kept burning on those of Isaac and Jacob, and the example of their families preserved alive the remembrance and the acts of the living God in the nations around them.

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With a train which became the suitor of a prince, with costly presents of gold and ornaments according to the custom of both ancient and modern days, but more particularly conforming to Eastern usage, the confidential servant of Abraham was sent on his embassy to the kindred of his master, there to receive a bride for the son of the patriarch. We gain a delightful impression both of the piety and intelligence of the household of Abraham from the account of the messenger to whom this important transaction was intrusted. The faith of the patriarch animated the other members of his household, and a strong chain of love encircled all. After a long journey, the train reached the plains of Mesopotamia, and then the tents of Nahor appeared in view; and then, in the prospect of the immediate discharge of his commission, the messenger of the patriarch sought explicit direction from the God of Abraham.

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While the description of the interview at the fountain, "without the gate of the city," gives a most beautiful view of the manners of the age and the people, and an unsurpassed picture of the freshness and simplicity of pastoral life, it proves at once the piety and the clear discrimination of the agent employed. The beauty of the youthful Rebekah caught his eye, while the test he devised afforded a safe criterion of the character of the woman. Weary with the labours of the sultry day, after tending her own flocks, had she been indolent or inactive, selfish or sullen, she had turned from his request, and suffered his attendants to administer to his wants. But as she looked upon them—dusty, weary, parched by thirst, worn down by long travel—the sympathies of a kind nature were awakened, as the servant ran to meet her, saying, "Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water from thy pitcher." She said, "Drink, my lord," and she let down the pitcher upon her hand and gave him to drink; and when he had done drinking, she said, "I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking." Thus did the maiden clearly prove that she possessed some of the qualities most necessary for a wife—that ready self-forgetfulness, that kindness, cheerfulness, and desire to promote the happiness of others, that sunshine of the heart which sheds its brightening beams over all the clouds that darken domestic life. Through all the ages of the world, in all the circumstances in which mankind are placed, the wife has ever need of them, and wisely may the suitor look for them. But the servant of the patriarch, "still wondering, held his peace." Not until assured that she was of the race of the true worshippers of the God of Abraham, that she had been trained in the fear of the Lord, did he feel assured that the fair and kind Syrian damsel was to be chosen for the wife of his master's son. He had felt that the prayer was answered. He had taken out the rich gifts intended for her, but he seems to hesitate as he says, "Whose daughter art thou! Tell me, I pray thee, is there room in thy father's house for us to lodge in?" And she answered, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore unto Nahor."

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"And the man bowed down and worshipped the Lord, and he said, Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth. I being in the way, the Lord hath led me to the house of my master's brethren."

The negotiation between the servant of Abraham and the father and brothers of Rebekah was soon concluded. They deferred not the answer to be given, when the messenger had laid before them his errand, and told them of the wealth and honour of his master; and the whole transaction impresses us with an idea of the piety and kindness of the family of Bethuel.

The thing is from the Lord—while the rich gifts, made to all the members of the family, proved the truth of the statements of the messenger, and perhaps enforced his plea. Yet, when he urged the immediate departure of the bride for the tent of her husband, the hearts of the mother and of the brothers yet clung to the youthful maiden. They shrank from a separation so sudden, so complete—and they said, Let the damsel stay with us a few days—at least ten. Oh, do not snatch her away from us so suddenly. But after that, she shall go. [72]

And he said, "Hinder me not. Seeing that the Lord hath prospered me, send me away that I may go to my master." And they said, "We will call the maiden, and inquire at her mouth." And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, "Wilt thou go with this man?" And she said, "I will go."

Are we not, even at this period, taught lessons of parental wisdom, in the care displayed by the ancient patriarch respecting the choice of a wife for his son? In the care taken to secure an unstained parentage in one who had been early trained in the habits of piety and godly principles of action? The character of the family is often stamped upon each member, and the marked features are transmitted from generation to generation, even where the character of the woman may be modified by her new relations. As she advances in years she often returns to the habits of her youth, while she almost invariably adopts the practice of her own mother in the early nurture and training of her children. [73]

He who would have reformed France was taught that he must begin his work by training mothers. And thus the ancient patriarch foresaw that the great nation that was to descend from him, like to the stars of heaven for multitude, would long bear the impress of the character of the mother who rocked it in the first cradle of its existence, and his wisdom was manifested in the pains which he took to secure a good lineage and right habits and principles. The foresight of the father could go no farther. Time must test the individual character. [74]

After they left the tents of Bethuel, the train, now augmented by the presence of the bride and her immediate attendants, her nurse and handmaids, slowly wended its way back to the tents of the patriarch, pursuing the natural highways of the country,—now by the stream, then across the plain, then through the desert, sandy, barren, trackless; then winding through the mountain pass, encamping during the heat of the day by the fountain and under the shade, and pursuing their journey in the cool of the evening and of the morning.

Love or devotion, or the mingling of both, led Isaac out into the fields at eventide to meditate, and his feet turned towards the route by which his messengers might be expected, and the eye of his servant descried him afar off, and he pointed him out to the stranger. And while the messenger seems to have hastened to meet his master and give an account of his mission, Rebekah descended from her lofty seat and covered herself with a veil. [75]

Henry the Fourth, of France, met his bride soon after she entered his kingdom, and mingled with her attendants, that he might watch her unobserved; and when his presence was announced she kneeled, and he gracefully raised her up. Napoleon entered the carriage of his Austrian bride, and announced himself, while she gazed with wondering eyes upon one, long only known as the enemy of her father's house and the terror of his kingdom. The meeting of the heir of the patriarch and his youthful bride is quite as interesting a scene as any of those recorded of more modern days.

And Isaac went out to meditate in the fields at eventide, and he lifted up his eyes, and, behold! the camels were coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she lighted off the camel. For she had said unto the servant, "What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "It is my master;" therefore she took a veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all things that he had done. And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. [76]

Rebekah seems to have made an affectionate, happy wife. Many years passed before children were born to Isaac; and when the twin boys, Esau and Jacob, were in childhood, there was evidently a marked difference in their characters. Esau was active, restless, and enterprising, He grew up a hunter,—daring and bold,—loving a life of change and adventure; while Jacob was a "plain man, dwelling in tents." Blindness was stealing over Isaac and unfitting him for the cares which rested upon him, for the supervision of his numerous servants and his many flocks and herds. During the frequent absences of Esau upon his hunting expeditions, these cares must have devolved upon Rebekah and Jacob. Her heart clung to the child who was ever with her in sympathy; while the tales of peril and adventure with which Esau enlivened the wearisome days of his father, were as acceptable to blindness and loneliness, as were the presents of the game he so frequently brought. "And Isaac loved Esau." Thus the injudicious fondness of the parents sowed the seeds of bitterness and alienation between the two brothers, and led to their mutual estrangement. The birth-right, which implied the inheriting of the blessing promised to the seed of Abraham, was despised by Esau, who, doubtless, in his prolonged wanderings from home, and his frequent associations with the inhabitants of the land, had been led to feel contempt for the worship and the promises of God, and in his reckless levity he transferred it to Jacob for "*a mess of pottage*," while he further alienated himself from his parents and brother by marrying the daughter of a Hittite. "This was a grief and sorrow of mind to Isaac and Rebekah." Forgetting the respect due to them as his parents; forgetting his own position as the eldest son of the heir of the promise; heedless of the example of filial deference shown by Isaac, and of all the care that preserved the family free from the corruption around them, he formed an union with those who were strangers to the faith of Abraham and of a race apostate from the worship of Jehovah. [77]

Yet, while mourning the perverseness of his favourite child, the father, aged and blind, did not [78]

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propose to withdraw his favour from him; and, feeling that his infirmities increased, Isaac bade Esau with his own hands prepare him a favourite dish, that he might eat and bless him before his death. Did we better understand the customs of that age, we might find that Isaac was not merely influenced by bodily appetite, but that there might be a peculiar significance in the act.

We do not love to dwell upon Rebekah's deceit and the lessons of falsehood she taught her son—and the prophecy uttered before the birth of the children, neither justifies nor extenuates her guilt; for God has never taught his people, that to promote his plans they are to violate his laws.

Alienated from her elder son, we see Rebekah, by intrigue and treachery, seeking to advance the interests of the younger at the expense of the rights of his brother. As we read the sacred narrative, every sympathy is awakened in favour of the injured Esau, and we hear, with burning indignation against the author of his wrong, his pathetic cry, "Hast thou no blessing for me! Bless me, even me, my father!" But the artifice of the mother and wife was successful. She secured all she sought—and her success brought its own punishment. Dark clouds of hate settled over the household, and Esau waited only for the death of his father that he might destroy the life of his brother; and to save the life of her son, the mother was forced to send him into banishment. Again the intriguing, managing character of the mother appears. She assigned what might be a reason, but not the true reason, to Isaac. "I am weary of my life, because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these which are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me?" The plea of the mother prevailed, and Isaac blessed Jacob, and he left the land of his father, ostensibly to seek a wife, but in truth to flee from the vengeance of his brother. [80]

The son of the wealthy patriarch went not out like an Eastern suitor—not with a train such as Abraham sent when he wooed Rebekah for his son. To avoid the hate of Esau, he stole like a fugitive from the tents of Isaac; and, a foot-worn pilgrim, unattended, he sought the kindred of his mother. And here the mother and her favourite child parted. She had alienated his brother to promote his interests. She had sacrificed her integrity to secure his fortune, and her plan had succeeded. She had secured the object at which she had aimed, and yet in the result she had been forced to send forth her darling child—a homeless wanderer. [81]

There is no reason to believe that the mother and the son ever met again. From this time she disappears. Surrounded by the alienated Esau's hated wives and ill-loved children, separated from the child of her affection, she may have sunk into a premature grave, or she may have lived many sorrowful years to feel the miseries she had drawn upon herself by her violations of the rules of rectitude, and an eager desire to promote the happiness of one child at the sacrifice of that of another.

There are still too many families involved in all the bitterness of domestic strife from the unjust partiality of one or both of the parents for favoured children. If, as children advance in life and their characters are formed, a calmer feeling succeeds the trembling tenderness which guarded their infant days, and our love to them (as to all other mortal beings) results from an appreciation of their characters, so that one may awaken a purer regard than another, this feeling is very different from that partial fondness which adopts one and gives him a place in our affection to the exclusion of another. That instinctive justice which compels a higher regard for the purer moral worth, will, of itself, prevent that parental partiality which leads to injustice or to an infringement of established rights and recognised principles. An unjust parent presents one of the most revolting pictures of human nature. The character involves a disregard of the most sacred ties and the tenderest relations. And whoever exhibits parental injustice, or that partial fondness which leads to injustice, at once destroys the affections and violates the moral sense. Families trained under such influences, still exhibit revolting scenes of human depravity—of bitterness, strife, alienation and revenge. Who can tell how much of the estrangement of Esau, and this early introduction of the worship of strange gods among his descendants, may have been induced by the conscious alienation of his mother, and the unjust preference of the interests of his brother? Had Rebekah, with a mother's love, striven to win her eldest son back to his father's tent and the altar of his God—had she still respected his rights and preserved his regard by undeviating truth and faithfulness, she would have retained a strong hold upon him, and her influence might have been long felt by her descendants, in restraining them from the sins of those around them. [82]

We cannot yet part with the two principal actors in these sad scenes of treachery and deceit. We think of Rebekah, the companion of her blind husband—deprived of the son who had shared and alleviated her cares, and conscious of having awakened that bitter hate which would seek the blood of a brother—still following in her thoughts the footsteps of the wandering Jacob, feeling that by her own intrigues she had banished him from his home and her presence. [83]

And we may follow Jacob, as he stole from the tents of Isaac, a wanderer like the first fugitive, with his brother's curse upon him. Until this hour all Jacob's views and feelings seem earthly and grovelling. Until now, there has been no indication of that trust and piety which afterwards marked his life. He had seemed worldly, cunning, ready to snatch any personal advantage. From this period he seems to awaken to a higher—a spiritual life. He seems to have comprehended the deeper meaning of promise and prophecy. We cannot tell what remorseful and despairing thoughts filled his soul as he left his home—how strange and inexplicable may have seemed all the ways of God toward him. Yet he must have felt that, in punishment of his deceit and falsehood, he was thus sent forth with but his scrip and staff, while he left Esau to inherit the possessions of his father. [84]

He had wandered until he was faint and weary, and then he had lain himself down on the earth, [85]

with stones for his pillow and the heavens for the curtains of his tent. In the silence of the night his soul was opened to spiritual revealings—to those influences from heaven which marked the change in his future life. He *saw* the angels of God ascending and descending upon him. Often before this may they have visited him—constantly may they have hovered over him—but now he was made conscious of the presence, watch and interposition of the heavenly intelligences of the higher presence of the God of Abraham. From this hour we trace a different influence pervading the heart and life of Jacob. He was awakened to higher motives—and from this hour he entered into covenant with God, and took Him to be his God.

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And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not;" and he was afraid, and said, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God—and this is the gate of heaven." And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillow, and set it for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. "And he called the name of that place Bethel." And Jacob vowed a vow, saying "If God will be with me, and will keep me in the way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God, and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee."

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The future life of Jacob was not free from the infirmity of human purpose—the imperfection of human nature. Yet from this time he walked with God, and all his deportment was marked by deep and humble piety. We doubt not that at this period he passed through that transforming change by which, in every age, and under every dispensation, the human soul has been enabled to enter into the mysteries of the spiritual life and enjoy communion with the Author of its existence, through that Spirit which breathed the first breath of life by which man became a living soul.



THE RIVAL SISTERS—LEAH AND RACHEL.

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here are two characters, which by some associations of memory, or caprice of fancy, are ever blended in our recollections—the one of ancient, the other of modern days—the one of sacred, the other of profane history. Catharine of Arragon, the unloved consort of the King of England, and Leah, the daughter of the Syrian shepherd, the hated wife of the Hebrew patriarch. There may seem to be as little assimilation of character and destiny, as there is of condition, between the daughter and the wife of a Syrian shepherd, and the daughter of one of the proudest monarchs of Spain and the wife of the haughtiest king of England; but they were both women, and both wives of those who loved them not; and this fact, whatever the condition of woman, stamps her lot as one of wretchedness. The wife neglected and despised is a woman sorrowful, whether she be the inmate

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of a tent or the dweller in a palace—whether she tend the flock or grace the throne.

Catharine of Arragon, the daughter of Isabella and Ferdinand, seems a truth-loving, devout woman, well prepared to welcome the great principles advanced by the Reformers, had she not been placed in circumstances most adverse to their influence. Had Henry embraced the doctrines and the principles of the Reformation from a conviction of their truth and importance—had he sought to regulate his own life by the pure precepts of the Bible, and thus striven to disseminate a pure faith among his people—had the conscientious Catharine been the patroness and the friend of the Reformers, instead of the trifling, if not guilty, Anne Boleyn—the English church and the state of religion in the English nation would doubtless have presented a different history for the past, and a different aspect for the future. [91]

But these are vain speculations. Catharine lived and died in the Papal faith. From the circumstances in which she was placed, she clung to it as to her womanly honour, her queenly dignity—as she would preserve her name from blight, her child from shame. And when she saw herself supplanted, when she was disgraced, divorced, her child declared illegitimate, and she knew her death was desired by one to whom she had been a devoted, faithful wife, what words could be more touching than those the dramatist gives as her last message to the king! "Tell him, his long sorrow has passed away." Oh, none but a wife dying thus, with the bitter consciousness that her life was undesired and that her death would be unregretted, can feel their full import. [92]

The bells which had tolled for Catharine of Arragon had hardly ceased to vibrate when the roar of the cannon announced the execution of Anne. The one died in January, the other was beheaded in May; and she who, by exciting and encouraging the unholy love of the king, had unchained his fierce passions and taught him to break through all restraints, was herself, full early, their victim.

Shall we pass from the palaces of England to the tents of Mesopotamia—from the last days of chivalry to those of the ancient patriarchs and shepherds of the earliest of recorded ages? [93]

When the wandering Jacob reached the abode of his mother's kindred, the land of Haran, he met, at the same fountain at which Rebekah had watered the flocks of the messenger of Abraham, the daughter of her brother Laban. He had seated himself by the well, and when the maiden came, he aided her to water her flocks; and he was thus introduced to his kinsmen by Rachel; and he told them that he was the son of Rebekah, of whom, perhaps, they had long lost the recollection; and with all the hospitality of the East—that hospitality which ever prevails among a simple and pastoral people—he was welcomed by the kindred of the mother.

The brother of Rebekah had two daughters. Leah, the elder, was tender-eyed, but Rachel was beautiful; and both sisters loved their cousin, while the heart of Jacob clung to the younger, the fair damsel who first welcomed him; so that he overlooked the claims of the elder,—the plain, if not disfigured, Leah. He brought no offerings with him to conciliate the favour of the father, and, according to the custom of the East, to facilitate his marriage. But he offered his personal service as an equivalent. And the son of Isaac served seven years for the daughter of Laban. But this long period was passed; and dwelling, as Jacob did, in the presence of Rachel, a member of the household of her father, they seemed but as a few days, for the love he bore her. [94]

But the time had now arrived when the marriage should be celebrated, and Jacob claimed his bride. But he who had wronged his brother, who had by disguise deceived his father, was now imposed upon by guile and treachery; and all the hopes and expectations of these long years were defeated. The customs of Eastern marriages favoured the deceit, and Jacob found that he was wedded to Leah, and not to the object of his affection. The deceit was most unjustifiable. The disappointment and the resentment must have been proportionally great; and miserable was the excuse of Laban, and wretched the device which was offered as an atonement. Yet Jacob must have bowed before the retributions of an avenging God, and the remembrance of his own treachery may have stayed his anger. [95]

Thus commenced the family of Jacob, with all the elements of dissension, strife and bitterness incorporated into its very earliest existence. The daughters of Laban both became the wives of Jacob, and they were rivals as women, as sisters, as wives and as mothers—forced to dwell together, yet ever in sullen hatred or bitter strife. When the ties of natural affection are severed, the heart never ceases to bleed; and there is no hatred so deep, so implacable as that which springs up where hearts once knit are thus alienated and forced asunder: and the sorrows and evils which sprang up in the family of Jacob may have led to that command so explicitly given by Moses—"Neither shalt thou take a wife to her sister to vex her, in her lifetime." [96]

The heart of Jacob never departed from Rachel. She was the chosen bride. He loved her with a deep and true affection, while the forced claims of Leah awoke only the remembrance of the deceit. In the emphatic language of the Bible, "he loved Rachel, but he hated Leah," and it was in accordance with the constant exhibitions of human nature that it should be thus. He had never sought her love. No love, no devotedness, could efface the remembrance of her connivance at that deep-laid plot which had imposed her upon him as a wife. Yet the lot of Leah was peculiarly a lot of reproach and trial—and as we behold her wretchedness, we are led, not to extenuate her fault, nor to palliate her sin, but to forgive and pity her sorrows. [97]

In early youth the sympathies are all awakened for the beautiful and the beloved Rachel, the only chosen, the betrothed bride. As we advance in years, in deeper acquaintance with human hearts, in truer fellowship in human suffering, we learn to feel for the plain and hated Leah. There is something deeply touching in the quiet sorrow which marks her lot; in her deep consciousness of

her husband's alienation and her sister's hate. We feel how difficult it might have seemed to resist the authority of the father, when it was aided by the pleadings of her own affection and the customs of her people. We glance into the tents of Jacob, and contrast Leah with the beautiful, the loved, the indulged, the self-willed Rachel. There we see her, plain and unattractive in person, broken in spirit, bowed down by the consciousness of her own sin and her husband's hate—her sister's bitter contempt—striving, though scarce hoping, to win the love of her husband; and welcoming the anguish of a mother, with the fond assurance, "Now will my husband love me, for I have borne him a son."

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We follow the sisters, as, still side by side, but with alienated hearts and estranged affections, they depart from the tents of their father to follow the footsteps of their husband,—Rachel and her offspring are the first objects of the care, as of the affection, of the patriarch. Yet we find Rachel, the loved and indulged wife, more murmuring, more repining, more fault-finding than Leah. By sorrow and trial, Leah may have learned submission; and the dearest earthly hopes disappointed—all her affections as a wife crushed and despised—in her hour of grief, and in the desolation of a widowhood of hate, she may have sought and found that love which never faileth, which giveth liberally and upbraideth not.

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And He whose ear is ever open to the cry of his creatures, who forgives even while he punishes their iniquities, pitied Leah, and, without upbraiding her for that deceit by which she became a wife, gave her the joys of a mother; and in all the names bestowed upon her children, Leah at once recognises the mercy of God, while she still remembers that she is hated of her husband—attesting at once her conscious sorrow and her trusting faith.

Rachel was childless—and when she saw Leah rejoicing as a mother, it awoke all the bitterness of envy. With the unreasonable pettishness of a wife ever indulged, she reproached her husband. For once, the anger of Jacob was kindled against the idolized Rachel. "Am I in God's stead?" said he. The consciousness of being the loved and the cherished one—the overflowing tenderness and the ready indulgence which Rachel received, made her only more exacting and imperious; and while Leah seemed softened by trials and sorrows, her sister grew more unreasonable by indulgence, and was at once haughty and insolent. So corrupt is human nature, that the gratification of our desires too often merely excites the pride and haughtiness of the human heart, and the prosperous claim the blessings of Heaven as a matter of right; while it is mercifully ordained that the very sorrow which ever follows transgression, the evils which await all departures from duty and right, should, by their very tendency, awaken repentance and lead to a penitent and humble spirit.

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When the daughters of Laban left the house of their father, either from a latent superstition, or from a family cupidity, Rachel stole the household gods of Laban and secreted them; and with an art worthy of the daughter of Laban, she prevented her father from reclaiming them; thus paving the way for the introduction of idolatry into the household of Jacob. He had already introduced polygamy by his marriage with her, and, to secure her, and thereby gratify her rivalry of her sister, he had multiplied his wives, and brought upon himself still heavier sorrows and trials. It was the beauty of Rachel which first captivated the eye, and then enthralled the heart of Jacob; and the wisest of men, thus ensnared, are still led into sin and folly. All the influences of Rachel upon his heart and life seem to have been unhappy; and the narrative shows that the strongest passion, gratified in defiance of prudence and previously imposed obligation, can only lead to disappointment and vexation. The two sisters both proved the love of the wife, in leaving all at the command of the husband; and the God in whom Jacob still trusted, guarded him against all the designs of Laban, averted the wrath of his brother, and guided him to the land of Isaac. He had passed Jordan with his staff and his scrip—he went out an outcast, and a fugitive; he returned with the train of a chief, the retinue of an Eastern prince; and his heart swelled with thanksgiving as he recounted the mercy and remembered the faithfulness of Jehovah. His father was still living—the nurse of Rebekah, who so long since had left the family of Bethuel, came to close her eyes in the tents of the grand-daughter of her former master; but the mother who had led her son into sin, who had taught him to practise that deceit which had recoiled upon himself, is not mentioned. She, doubtless, was laid by the side of Abraham and of Sarah, in the cave of Machpelah. She had anticipated a short absence, a transient separation from her son. She purposed to send for him to return to his father, that he might yet be heir of the estate; but when Jacob did return in wealth and honour—yet bearing that bitter burden of care and sorrow, from which no honour, no wealth are exempt,—she who would have assuredly exulted in the one, and sympathized with the other, was not in the tent of Isaac. She came not forth to welcome her son, to embrace her relatives and daughters or caress their children. Her place in the tent and at the board was vacant—her voice was hushed—her heart cold. The places that had known her, knew her no more. And thus it often is. Before man attains wealth or honour, those who had most rejoiced to witness it have passed away; while still, fair as is the outward lot, there are internal sorrows, imbittering every pleasant draught, and casting a shadow over all the brightness of human existence. Thus it is that the most prosperous are often followed by a cloud, reflecting glory and radiance upon such as are without, but covering with gloom and darkness those who fall within its shadow.

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And soon followed the bitterest trial of Leah's life,—the shame, sorrow, and widowhood of her only daughter; avenged by those who neglected to guard her—while the husband, though indifferent to the sorrow and love of the wife, must have felt the anguish of the father.

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And the rivalry and strife of the sisters was over. "Give me children or else I die," was the cry of the wife whose wishes had been laws—and the prayer prompted by hate and envy was answered.

Yet Rachel died. And in that hour of mortal agony, of bitter suffering, Leah probably stood by her sister. With affections estranged, love turned into bitterness, with hearts alienated, but fates inseparably united, they had passed their days. Their tents had been pitched side by side,—the voices of their children had been mingled together as they fell upon their mothers' ears,—they had been called to worship at the same altar,—they had been members of the same household.

Forced thus to dwell together, constantly to meet, to be familiar with the same objects, to have the same interests, they were alienated, but not separated; and if their feelings were crushed, they were not all uprooted. As Leah saw her younger, her beautiful sister in the hour of extremity, in the agonies of a mother's sufferings, the sympathies of a woman must have risen with the love of a sister, and bitter tears of repentant sorrow must she have shed upon the pallid brow and quivering lips, as the hopes and the memories of youth and childhood gathered around, to reproach her for that deceit by which she had sown their path through mutual life with thorns, and made their joys to be but ashes. There are no tears so bitter as those which are shed by affection, too late revived, over those whom we have loved and yet injured,—over those from whom we have suffered ourselves to be estranged. [106]

Rachel was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. She was not laid in the sepulchre of Abraham. The children were left to the fostering care of her hated sister. Her sons passed through trials from which she could not guard them, and they came to honours while she knew it not. At this distance, her life seems to us a dream—a few years of pleasant childhood, a short vision of youthful love,—then comes the strife of life, its stern discipline, its bitter trials, its disappointed hopes, and its termination in the grave. [107]

As we dwell upon the characters so truthfully delineated in the word of God, and follow the record of human pride, passion and infirmity, we are taught at once to magnify and adore the patience, the forbearance and the mercy of Jehovah. And let us remember that it is because these characters are reflected in the pure mirror of truth that the dark shades so plainly appear. In every age the heart of man is the same; but the temptations which especially evince this depravity may be peculiar to some particular age or condition. [108]

We know not how long Leah survived her sister. Her advancing years were not exempt from affliction, and age brings its own trials; yet prosperity rested upon Jacob—and in the decline of life she may have known happiness desired, but not realized, in youth.

After the death of his beloved Rachel, the heart of Jacob may have turned to Leah, and a peaceful friendship have succeeded the storm and the conflicts of youthful passion. Sorrow may have knit hearts softened by the mutual consciousness of error and by the tears of repentance, and strengthened by the hopes of pardon, and drawn to each other by the strong ties of parental love for their mutual offspring. When the patriarch was called into Egypt, Leah went not with him. He had laid her in the gathering-place of his sons, in the tent of his fathers. From the touching expression of the dying patriarch—himself far from the land of his fathers' sepulchres—"And there I buried Leah," we feel that, in age and bereavement, the heart of Jacob turned to Leah. The repudiated wife of his youth became the solace of his age, and her memory awoke the last tender recollections in the dying patriarch. As we have read the book of God, we have been taught that good, inordinately coveted, or obtained by injustice and deceit, ever brings a curse. The principal actors in the events recorded in these chapters of Genesis, may have secured the object which they sought, yet the attainment did not avert or mitigate the punishment of the treachery by which it was secured. [109]

Rebekah obtained the birth-right and the coveted blessing for her favourite child, and by that act separated him from herself and doomed him to a banishment from his father's house, and from that hour she saw his face no more. Laban secured by his deceit the marriage of his unattractive daughter and the establishment of the beautiful Rachel, but he thus alienated the children he still seems to have loved, and that wealth which he so coveted. [110]

Leah, by her connivance at her father's deceit, married the man she loved, but it was to lead a life of bitter, of heart-consuming sorrow. Jacob, departing from the institution of marriage that he might yet possess Rachel, entailed upon himself a career of strife, bitterness and disappointment; and introduced into his family an example that became a fruitful source of individual depravity and national corruption; while he first witnessed the evil effects of his complicated domestic relations in the conduct of his eldest son, and felt at once his shame as a husband and his reproach as a father. And are not these things written for our edification? Are we not, in every page of God's word, taught explicitly that for man there is neither safety nor happiness save in the path of duty and of literal obedience? That each departure from the rule of right, whatever be the motive, and crowned as it may seem to be with success, draws a long succession of sin and sorrow in its train? Many have studied the word of God to justify sin, or palliate guilt, by the examples of the former dispensation. Let it be carefully studied, and it will show that the transgression which secured a positive object, still brought its punishment,—if delayed, never remitted—although successful, never justified. The word of God never justifies crimes, though in infinite wisdom He over-rules them to promote the designs of his eternal providence. [111]

Modern days and Christian institutions allow no examples of the exact type of the strife and rivalry exhibited in the household of the patriarch of Israel. Yet, while human nature remains as it is, there will ever be the jealousies, the strifes, the bitterness arising from misplaced affection, or alienated hearts, or jarring interests. There is still to be found the coquetry which would win love from a sister or a friend, and the treachery that would supplant the rival—as there are still fathers who, for motives of interest, would sacrifice their daughters, regardless of their hearts or [112]

their happiness. Youthful beauty still attracts the eye and wins the heart, and the best and wisest of men are too often enthralled by mere personal attraction.

Human nature is ever the same, and the motives and feelings which swayed the generations who have mouldered back to dust are still felt and acknowledged. [113]

While we thus attempt to trace the outlines of the domestic history of these individuals, we cannot but feel that there is a surpassing beauty and excellence in the character of Abraham. He bore the fresh impress of a renovated world, and was truly worthy of the pre-eminence which is always allotted to him. Isaac seems to have dwelt in quiet, peaceful prosperity. Inheriting great wealth, dwelling until mature age with his parents, there seem to have been few occasions in which the prominent traits of the character are displayed. His life offers less of interest, less to excite, less to praise and less to blame than either Abraham's or Jacob's. The father's energy, patience, faith and obedience had prepared the way for the prosperity of the son; and Isaac, nursed in affluence and cherished by maternal affection, seems to have exhibited less energy, enterprise and decision than either his father or his descendants. His premature blindness doubtless conduced to this inactive life. Yet he trusted and obeyed the God of his father, though he enjoyed neither the exalted faith of Abraham, nor was he favoured with the enlarged prophetic views of Jacob. [114]

In all the trials and infirmities of Jacob—from the day in which he left his father's house until the hour in which "he gathered his feet in his bed and died" in Egypt—we see the evidence and the growth of true piety, of enlarged faith. He was encompassed with infirmities, and these infirmities betrayed him into sins, which brought in their train the sorrows which, through Divine grace, purified and sanctified him. Thus his character excites our increasing love and sympathy, and his advancing piety our veneration.

From the glimpses we obtain of the families of Nahor, Bethuel, and Laban, we trace a gradual departure from Jehovah among the descendants of Shem. Nahor and Abraham were possessors of like faith. They both worshipped the God of their fathers—of Shem, of Noah, of Methuselah, of Enoch, of Seth, of Adam. Bethuel's household still remained a household of faith, but in Laban we see the beginning of a departure from the true God. The first steps towards idolatry were taken. There was the resort to a sensible representation,—some image probably used as a symbol of the true God at first, but certainly ensnaring the heart, and ending in idolatry. Thus the gods of Laban, which Rachel stole, were leading him and his family rapidly to idol-worship, and to forgetfulness of the true God. Still he had not sunk into gross idolatry. Laban still pledged himself, and invoked the name of the God of Abraham and of Nahor, and of their fathers, when he entered into covenant with Jacob. He had not yet altogether abjured the worship of Jehovah: he had begun to mingle a false worship with it, and thus prepared the way for the full apostasy of his descendants. [115]

That the chosen people might be kept from the taint of idolatry, Jacob left Laban; yet Rachel had stolen her father's images—and there is then great significance in that act by which Jacob renewed his covenant with God, when called upon to build the altar at Bethel. [116]

"And Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you and be clean, and change your garments: and let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went. And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their ear-rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem." [117]

Probably the ear-rings were used as heathen charms or amulets. While idolatry, as a leprosy, was thus beginning to infect the household, he saw the need of their purification; and there seems no accidental connection between this searching out and putting away of idolatry in the household of Jacob and the following death of Rachel: "With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live."

The cherished wife of Jacob, deeply tainted with the superstitions by which her family were corrupting the religion of Jehovah, may have been thus removed to prevent further contagion. While the apostle may refer to this example in his promise: "Nevertheless she shall be saved in child-bearing, if she continue in the faith." And this sin may have excluded Rachel from the sepulchre of Abraham. The plague-spot disappears from this time, and the purification of the household was availing. For many generations, whatever their other sins, the children of Jacob were kept from idolatry. [118]



MIRIAM.

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THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN UPON THE DESTINY AND CHARACTER OF MAN, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE LIFE OF MOSES.



here were designs of infinite wisdom to be accomplished by the long sojourn of the children of Jacob in Egypt. The people of Israel were appointed to guard the name and worship of Jehovah, until He who was to bring life and immortality to light should rise from among them. Until the "Star" that was to come from Jacob should shed its glorious radiance over this darkened earth. When all the children of men were departing from God, He chose this family to perpetuate the memory of his works and his mighty acts in preserving the first history of the race, and to prepare the way for the fulfilment of the designs of infinite mercy toward a sinful and apostate world. By miracles and judgments, by type and prophecy, by altars and sacrifices, he kept before this people the mysterious promise

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given in the hour of transgression.

From this family was to descend him who was to be the light of the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel, him who was at once the Almighty Saviour, the everlasting Father, the wonderful Counsellor, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, who bore our sickness, and took upon himself our iniquities. And while from the family of Israel that high spiritual influence was to emanate, which was to renovate men's moral nature and change the aspect and condition of the race, restoring the knowledge of the true God; and again, through the great atoning sacrifice, opening the gates of eternal life and bringing spiritual blessings to all mankind,—the character of the children of Israel, their civil institutions, their legislation, their history, their laws, their literature, were to leave their impress upon all the nations of the earth.

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The apostle accounts it the chief honour of the Jews that unto them were committed the oracles of God. They were employed to transcribe and preserve the inspired books. From them went forth those who first announced the great truths of a Saviour crucified and a Comforter promised. For successive ages the nation of Israel stood surrounded by the heathen world,—stood the witnesses of the faithfulness of Jehovah, the monuments of his truth and power, the only nation upon the face of this earth who worshipped the true God.

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Thick moral darkness shrouded all other lands—the nation of Israel alone had light in their dwellings, and the beams of the rising Sun of righteousness fell upon them and revealed the gross darkness around them.

And he who had chosen the people of Israel for such a high purpose, in infinite wisdom devised the means to fit them for their destination, and he guided and guarded them in each stage of

their national existence. Egypt was one of the first kingdoms founded after the deluge, and it is probable that those who re-peopled it after this event, had retained many impressions of the former world. Her monuments, yet remaining, attest the high antiquity of her arts and sciences, and her early advancement in refinement and civilization.

Her priests and wise men were the instructors of the ancient world, and the philosophers of Greece resorted to Egypt to study legislation and philosophy, and Egypt imparted to Greece, and Greece to Rome, the arts and sciences by which they refined and elevated Europe. [123]

God designed Egypt to be the nursery of the nation of Israel. The granary of the ancient world offering abundant sustenance, he brought Jacob and his sons into it as one family, and here they remained until they multiplied and increased, and became like the stars of heaven for number; and He who led them into Egypt ordained all the events of their national history so as to promote his own eternal plans.

The patriarch led his children, with their flocks and herds,—the wealth of a pastoral people,—into this land as the invited guests of Pharaoh, the monarch of Egypt. And as he bowed before the king, the aged patriarch taught him at once the brevity of man's life and the unsatisfying nature of all earthly enjoyments, as recalled at the close of a long pilgrimage: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my pilgrimage." Pharaoh received the aged man with respect, and showed him all honour; while in consideration of the pastoral habits of his sons, a portion of land, separate from the Egyptians, was allotted them for a place of abode. Thus they were kept a distinct, unmingled people, and enabled to maintain their own peculiar institutions, practise the rites of their own religion, and preserve the worship of the God of Abraham. And in all the oppression which they here sustained, we do not find that their religion was ever persecuted or their rites forbidden. And as Egypt was the cradle of the nation of Israel, so it was to be the school in which the children of Jacob were to form a national character. The wandering, pastoral tribes, transformed into an agricultural people and settled residents, and instructed in the arts of civilized life, were fitted to take possession of the allotted heritage. After fostering their infancy and feebleness, the monarchs of Egypt gradually changed their course as the increasing numbers of the Israelites excited jealous apprehension. Yet all this varying policy and every cruel edict advanced the designs of Jehovah and promoted the welfare of his chosen people. The cruelty of the Egyptians alienated the hearts of the Israelites from the nation and from the land of Egypt, and kept freshly before them the remembrance of the inheritance promised. While considered as strangers, treated as aliens, and surrounded by enemies, the bonds of brotherhood were more closely drawn, and they clung together, a distinct and separate people. [124]

The tribes were one nation. While the people of Israel were oppressed, they were not enslaved. They were tributary, but not reduced to personal bondage. They dwelt together in that portion of Egypt assigned to them. They spoke their own language. They seem to have regulated their internal affairs by their own elders. They maintained their own worship. Their family relations were unbroken. They must have amassed riches, for they brought great wealth out of Egypt, as the offerings at the tabernacle show—and although in part this may have been received from the restitution which the conscience-smitten Egyptians offered upon their departure, all could not have been thus derived. The whole narrative of the Israelites shows that they were rich in silver and gold, and possessed much cattle. Yet all their property was personal—they owned no land. And much of the tribute was, doubtless, exacted as rent, paid by many in personal labour; and while they thus erected, perhaps, the proudest monuments of Egyptian art by this enforced labour, they were acquiring the various knowledge needful to a nation; while their very task-masters, by compelling them to acquire the habits of industry, to which a pastoral people are always averse, were school-masters, needful though harsh, teaching them to develop their energies and forcing them to exercise patience and to acquire skill. [125]

Learning and wisdom have departed from Egypt. She has long been the basest of kingdoms. The race of the Pharaohs has passed away. She has been for ages governed by slaves. Temple and palace are in ruins. Her tombs, sacred and precious, have been pillaged; And the bones of her great and noble ones, her priests and kings, feed the fire by which the wandering Arab prepares his food. Yet many monuments of her ancient arts remain, interesting as attesting her power, grandeur, and high advancement in civilization, and still more valuable as corroborating the sacred history and throwing light on many passages of the inspired word,—at once showing the former residence of the Israelites in Egypt, the close connection of these ancient people, and affording proofs of that wisdom which selected Egypt for the cradle and school of the chosen race. [126]

The Egyptians, gradually after the flood, lost the knowledge of Jehovah and departed from his worship.

At the time Joseph married the daughter of the priest of On, the Egyptians could not have sunk into that gross idolatry which contrasted so strangely with their wise legislation and scientific attainments; and their priests are supposed to have concealed, under mystic symbols, mysterious truths, which they imparted to the initiated, while they taught a grosser system to the common mind. While in Egypt the Israelites seem never to have been exposed to the debasing immoralities which prevailed among the nations around the promised land. [127]

The children of Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham four hundred years. When Jehovah called his people out of Egypt they were fitted to receive the laws and institutions which he designed to give them, and to take the high position he assigned them among the nations of the earth. And lest, during their long sojourn in the wilderness, they should lose the arts of civilized life, they

were employed in the construction of the tabernacle. By the minute enumeration of all that was required for the completion of this work, we see that the erection involved an extensive acquaintance with the mechanical arts, and of those, too, which indicate a high degree of advancement in the luxuries of polished life. Thus the generation born in the wilderness were instructed, and preserved from degenerating into mere shepherds, hunters, or warriors. The restless were occupied, and the work proved a bond of union for the whole people, exciting the interest and employing the energies of all the different classes of the great multitude. [130]

The long ages of the sojourn of the children of Jacob were drawing to a close. The iniquity of the Canaanites was now full; the children of Israel were prepared to be numbered among the nations of the earth; and the events dictated by the craft and policy of men were ordained to promote the infinite designs of Jehovah. For four hundred years the descendants of Jacob had dwelt in Goshen. From a pastoral they were already become an agricultural people; they had learned to prize the comforts of an established life, of quiet, peaceful homes, of pleasant places of abode. Dwelling in the richest portion of Egypt, protected from all foreign aggression, they there enjoyed abundance, peace, and prosperity, to which their wanderings in the desert furnished a sad contrast. [131]

The policy of Egypt had excluded the Israelites from her crimes. The energy, the love of change and adventure, which a martial life imparts, were unfelt; and had not oppression driven the Israelites from Egypt, the promise of that goodly land destined for their race had hardly induced the nation to leave their present abundance and protection. Thus, by the various dispensations of his providence, Jehovah was at once preparing a guide, leader, ruler, and future lawgiver for his people, while by the continued vexation, oppression, and cruelty of the Egyptian rulers, he was suffering them to alienate the affections of the children of Jacob from a country which had become the native land of the Israelites, which was the birth-place of generation after generation.

At the time Miriam, the sister of Moses, appears before us, the children of Israel had reached the fourth generation. A family had become a nation, a people in the bosom of another, dwelling together, distinct, separate, too numerous to be easily or safely held in subjection, too valuable as tributaries to be relinquished. Thus to hold them safely in bondage and to prevent their further increase, it became the settled policy of Egypt to oppress and degrade them. As their jealous apprehensions were at length awakened, by a policy as profound as it was cruel, the Egyptian monarchs endeavoured, in destroying the sons of this people, to force the daughters of Israel to intermarry with their oppressors, that they might obtain the wealth of the sons of Jacob, while the name and memory of his family would be swept from the earth. Yet dwelling, as the Israelites did, in a separate province, it was not easy for Pharaoh to find those who would execute his purposes; and the first efforts to cut off the race of the chosen, failed. He was however so intent upon their extermination, that he did not hesitate to direct that all the male children of the Israelites should be cast into the river as soon as they were born. [132]

While there were so many to court the favour of the monarch and ever ready for the darkest deeds, how could the sons of the Hebrews now escape? When Moses was born, his mother hid him three months; and when concealment was no longer possible, she sought for the babe a strange place of safety—in the very element which was indicated for its destruction. The slender ark is framed by the mother's hands, and deposited among the flags on the bank of the Nile. The morning was perhaps dawning, and the sky yet gray, when the anxious mother withdrew. [133]

In a few hours after, the chant of the boatmen is suddenly hushed, and the passing labourers shroud their heads in token of reverence, as, surrounded by her attendants, the daughter of Pharaoh approaches the river. The slight ark, with its precious burden, floating among the reeds, attracts her eye, and, as her maidens draw it from the water, the wail of the desolate infant strikes her ear. [134]

"The babe wept"—and full fountains of womanly tenderness were broken up in the heart of the princess of Egypt. "This is one of the Hebrew children," said she; and as she drew him from the waves, she resolved to save and adopt the child.

Miriam, the sister, had lingered near to watch, if not to save the child. We may fancy the Hebrew maiden at a little distance, eagerly bending forward, and gazing with intense and breathless interest. And when the princess announces her intention to protect the infant, in all the gladness of childhood she bounds forward, and, mingling with the royal train, asks, "Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?" And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, "Go;" and the maid went and brought the child's mother! [135]

Thus had the God of Israel overruled all the designs of evil to his people, by providing in the very family of Pharaoh a shelter and a home for the child—doomed by the impious monarch to destruction—but designed by Jehovah to be the saviour of his people. He who was thus drawn from the water was the ordained deliverer, guide, legislator, and prophet of Israel.

As Jehovah had appointed him to this high vocation, he not only guarded his life, thus threatened, but made the instruments intended for the extermination of the race the means of the full accomplishment of all its mysterious destiny. [136]

The child thus adopted into the royal family was not only saved from death, but was thus placed under influences most propitious for the attainment of all the various knowledge which could fit him for the high station to which he was destined. That helpless infant was not only to be the

deliverer of Israel, but by his political institutions, his legislative enactments, his moral precepts, his inspired teachings, he was to mould the character of his own people, and to influence other nations down through all coming ages. High was the honour allotted him as the deliverer and the lawgiver of Israel—still higher that as the prophet of the Lord. He was the promulgator of the great moral laws of the universe, originally engraven on the hearts of men, but now so effaced by sin as to be scarcely legible;—he was to establish those institutions which were to perpetuate the name and the worship of Jehovah among the children of men; and that memorial which, by a long line of types and sacrifices, was at once to prefigure and prepare for the great atoning sacrifice, offered for a lost world. [137]

Of all the fallen sons of Adam, none were ever destined to a station of more arduous responsibility, of more extensive and long-continued influence than that appointed to this Hebrew infant; and He who had marked out his destiny ordained the means which were to prepare him for it. Transplanted into the family of Pharaoh, he was there instructed in all the "wisdom of the Egyptians," and Egypt (as we know) was the fountain of ancient learning, science, and philosophy. While Jehovah communicated by direct inspiration to Moses, yet the mind of the ruler and leader of Israel had been prepared by that instruction which develops the capacity, expands [138] the mind, and enlarges the apprehension to receive and understand the institutions Jehovah gave his people, and he was thus enabled to co-operate with an enlightened mind in all the designs of God. But if the schools of Egypt imparted that intellectual attainment, mental discipline and knowledge of legislation in its various forms, so necessary for the lawgiver, there were other influences which were needful for the perfection of the character. There was a knowledge higher and holier than that ever taught by priests or Grecian philosophers,—a wisdom beyond that of the Egyptians, "the knowledge of the Lord," the God of his fathers, and the first great truths of religion should be breathed into the soul in the whispers of parental love. The earthly parent should lead the child to the feet of the great Creator.

And then in the formation of a character which was to leave its impress upon all future ages to the close of time, the affections were to be cultivated, the sympathies awakened, and all that is pure and kind and elevated in the nature of man drawn forth. And where is the influence which so gently moulds the character, refining, softening, and elevating it, as the affectionate, intelligent sister? As a man advances in life, the continual influence and association of virtuous and accomplished women is felt in all the relations he is called to sustain. [139]

We see in the various circumstances of the life of Moses a Divine recognition of the value of the family relation and of the importance of the influence of women in the formation of character.

Before Moses was admitted to the schools of Egyptian learning, before he was exposed to the snares and the splendours of a court, before he was called to a throne, he had learned lessons of the deepest wisdom from the lips of his parents. One higher than the royal of earth spoke [140] through the princess, when she said, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give thee wages." And faithfully did the mother fulfil her charge. She strove to imbue the soul of her child with living faith, while upon that infant heart she impressed the maxims of eternal truth—she imparted those lessons of trust and confidence, and inculcated that deep conviction of the power of truth, which led the man, by the grace of God, in the prime and flush of life, to refuse to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.

Had that mother been unfaithful to her high trust, had she infused into that infant heart lessons of ambition and worldliness, he had perhaps failed in the hour of trial, and another had led the tribes of Israel to the chosen land. A little band guarded Moses; the princess of Egypt, the mother of Moses, and his sister Miriam. Each one exerted her peculiar influence upon his character, while his future destiny attested the varied power of these influences and their relative value. [141]

As the saviour of the young Hebrew, as his protectress and adopted mother, the daughter of Pharaoh had a large claim upon him, and to her he was indebted for many of those high attainments which fitted him for his office. The slight incidental notices of the daughter of Pharaoh give us a delightful impression of her character.

There is something higher and nobler than a princess. She was a true woman, filled with all the quiet sympathies and kind affections of her sex, and possessing an energy and a persevering constancy which led her to fulfil her generous purposes, and made her impulses bear the fruits of benevolent action. [142]

Such women show what women should be, and such women in all ages make the influence of their characters to be felt. To her fostering care Moses owed life and advancement, education, honour, the standing of a prince, the polish and the refinement of the court. She proved her appreciation of knowledge, and we may well infer her own cultivated intelligence from the care with which she provided for the instruction of her charge. She showed that she could feel and that she cherished all the sympathies of domestic love, by providing for their indulgence, by allowing their continuance, and yielding to their claims, even though she was a princess of Egypt, the daughter of the haughty Pharaoh, and her adopted child belonged to a race studiously oppressed, degraded, and exposed to all contumely, and while, doubtless, she was no stranger to the prejudices which led her countrymen to look upon the sons of Israel as an outcast and despicable race. Still the bonds of national affection, of kindred and brotherhood, were all respected. The whole narrative shows that Moses was never alienated from his family, never taught to forget that he was a Hebrew. His patroness felt that there were holy ties never to be disregarded nor trampled upon. [143]

And while the princess of Egypt surrounded her infant charge with right influences, while she provided wisely for his intellectual culture, she likewise brought the influence of her own personal character to bear upon him. The influence of a pure woman, who unites refinement to intelligence, and adds to them the polish of the court without its corruption, would be as powerful as it would be salutary, and when to the higher qualities, mental and moral, the polished refinement and graceful attention to all the proprieties of life are imparted, a high finish is given to the character. Nor was that acquired grace and courtly manner a thing of frivolous import. It exerted an important influence upon the future destiny of the individual. The successful leaders of great multitudes have often owed almost as much to that high bearing and dignified demeanour which should be the distinct badge of those who are numbered with the great, as to their skill and discernment; and while treated in the court of Pharaoh as a scion of royalty, the young Hebrew acquired that air of conscious authority to which inferior minds always defer. He gained there that knowledge of courtly splendour and gayety which forced in him the conviction of their perfect insufficiency for the high demands of the spiritual nature, and that knowledge of the heart of man and its depraved qualities most needful to one who was at once to lead and control a multitude, and who was to stand before kings as the envoy of Jehovah. [144]

The Israelites never seem to have entered the Egyptian armies. It would have been contrary to the policy of the kings either to have encouraged a martial spirit or to have placed arms in the hands of this multitude; yet as one of the family of Pharaoh, Moses led the armies of Egypt. And needful it was that the future leader of Israel should be well instructed in all the tactics of war—should understand all the providing for, the ordering, and the encamping of vast hosts. It was perhaps only by arduous military service that he could have developed that capacity indicated by the vast skill with which an army of six hundred thousand men, encumbered with their wives and little ones, could be encamped in regular order, whether marching or resting. Ever desiring peace and acting on the defensive, yet ready to repel aggression, for forty years the nation of Israel were encamped as the hosts of an army. Each tribe with its own banner, marching and countermarching, taking down and putting up their tents, with all the skill and regularity of a disciplined army, and often engaged in actual warfare. He who could thus order and regulate such a host must have possessed the skill and science of the general. While the habits of long command, added to the consciousness of authority and Divine reliance, enabled him to prevent or control turbulent outbreaks. [145]

While the legislator of Israel owed so much to the fostering care of the daughter of Pharaoh in preparing him for his high destination, we cannot but feel a deep interest in her who so unconsciously contributed toward an influence and prepared an instrumentality quite adverse to the apparent interests of her people. We cannot but hope that, while she thus hastened the accomplishment of promise and prediction, she was herself led to the knowledge and worship of Israel's God. [146]

Might not one who thus adopted the brother, encircle in her affection the sister whose affectionate entreaty gave the babe a mother for its nurse? The fraternal affection which marks the family seems to indicate more than occasional intercourse. Between Miriam and her brother there was that sympathy which always results from an intimate association. The princess of Egypt may have imparted to Miriam many of the accomplishments of the courtly circle, for we find that she was skilled in music, that she led the dance; while, in return, Miriam may have imparted that higher knowledge and those deep truths of which her people were the appointed conservators, and the daughter of Pharaoh may have tasted the blessings which were held in trust for future ages. [147]

Miriam was the only sister of Moses, and she first appears as watching the fate of that child in whose destiny all the ages and all the nations of earth were to have an interest. The tender care which watched the cradle on the Nile continued through life, and from the day Moses was saved, down to the day when Miriam died in the wilderness, she seems ever associated with her brothers in all their efforts and designs. The influence of the sister is peculiarly her own. It is felt in early life in its softening, refining, and purifying tendency—in diverting opening manhood from rude sports or gross pursuits to the enjoyments of a more elevated and pure nature, and shedding a charm around the pleasures of home; while, if no other ties intervene, the bonds of affection grow stronger with each successive year. [148]

We cannot trace the course of Miriam's life. She appears before us for a season and then we lose sight of her for many years. She may have passed them in the retirement and obscurity of her rural home in the land of Goshen. She may have been counted in the train of the princess of Egypt and shone in the court of Pharaoh. Princes may have flattered her and nobles sued for her love. She seems never to have married,—yet her heart may have had its own history of love, perhaps unrequited, disappointed, or sacrificed at the altar of prudence, of conscience, or, it may be, ambition. Oh what a tale of suffering and of enjoyment would the history of one human heart present, if faithfully recorded! [149]

Years had passed: childhood was gone—youth was fleeing. The brother had attained a high distinction in the court of Egypt. He had tasted the pleasures of wisdom and the enjoyments of science and knowledge, while, as the adopted child of Pharaoh's daughter, he stood before the people, the prospective heir to the crown. [150]

Thus, in the prime of life, endowed with the richest gifts of mind and the attractions of manly beauty, adding the polish of the courtier to the wisdom of the philosopher—and all the adventitious advantages of royal birth received by his adoption—there lay before the young

Hebrew a bright vista of prospective glory and honour and earthly happiness.

But not to sit on the throne of Egypt had Jehovah raised this child of the chosen people from the death designed by their oppressor. Not to fit him for the throne of Egypt had he surrounded him with all that was propitious to intellectual and moral attainments and guided and watched each step of his course from his infancy.

Deep and inscrutable must have seemed the designs of Jehovah, as, when all was brightest, the dark clouds gathered around this favoured son of the Hebrews, and all the promise and purpose of his saved life seemed defeated. The hour of trial came—probably, as it generally comes, suddenly and unexpectedly. It was the hour which was to test his principles and prove his faith. The hour in which all the allurements of sense, the gratification of ambition, and (it may have seemed) the claims of grateful affection, were brought into conflict with the stern claims of duty and principle, and in this hour he did not fail. He chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. His choice was made. He abjured the throne and left the court. What disappointment must have fallen upon hearts who had looked to his exaltation as a pledge of good for his race, and who saw in his downfall the prolonged dominion of tyranny and persecution! [151]

Yet Moses was not permitted to remain in peace, although he had sunk into obscurity. He who was to lead the hosts of Israel through the great and terrible wilderness—who was to endure toil, labours, and privation, needed the nerve, the hardihood, the physical training, which could not be gained in the luxurious courts of the Pharaohs, or in the quiet, and, doubtless, comfortable and abundant homes of the husbandmen of Goshen. Amid the enjoyments of home, the pleasures of study, he need not have regretted the loss of a throne. [152]

For many years he, who had been trained in luxury and elegance, led the flocks of Jethro, and knew all the privations and the endurances of the shepherd in the desert. And while his frame was thus hardened and invigorated, while he learned to forego pleasure and endure bodily toil, his soul was nourished by solitary meditation and high communion with God. The philosopher can find instruction and interest in the works of creation, but only he who adds the adoration of the worshipper to the wisdom of the philosopher is prepared to study the works of Jehovah aright. [153]

What deep thought, what high imaginings, what profound reverence must have filled the soul of the Hebrew shepherd as he watched the stars in the silence and loneliness of the desert. As he sat, a solitary and banished man, under the shadow of the rocks of the wilderness, how strange, how incomprehensible must have seemed the events of his past life. The visions of his youth, the splendour and warlike pomp of the army or the pageant of courts, must have come over his soul like a dream. Even to us how strange seems this long sojourn in the wilderness, this enforced inactivity and apparent uselessness. Yet the God of Israel was promoting his own designs both among his people and in the heart of him who was to be their leader—weaning them from their place of abode, and preparing them for their departure, and fitting Moses to be their leader, guide, ruler, and lawgiver. Each dispensation of his providence, each passing occurrence, all the thoughts, the emotions, the solitary meditations, the reverential communion, the occasional intercourse with the few dwellers of the desert,—like the strokes, slight and almost imperceptible in their effect, which the block receives from the hand of the sculptor,—all were fitting the apparently exiled Hebrew for his high vocation as a prophet and legislator. [154]

And it is often thus. For many years may Jehovah be preparing his instruments for that event to which he destines them, and which they may then speedily accomplish. Yet this work in the soul, by which man is prepared to co-operate with his Maker, is silent, unseen, unmarked, so that often we may account this time as lost. And man, ignorant of his future destiny, and of the state to which he is to be called, will ever find it his true wisdom carefully to fulfil the present duty and to aim at deriving instruction and benefit from each dispensation of Divine providence, and from the ordering of each event of his life. [155]

In the careful provision made for the training of Moses, in the various instrumentalities used to prepare him for his appointed trust, we are taught that by no miraculous intervention does God supersede the necessity of the improvement of the faculties he has bestowed. The more enlightened the understanding, the more the powers of reason are cultivated, the more intelligently can man serve his Creator, and the more entirely does he co-operate in the designs of Infinite Wisdom. God does not bestow, by direct inspiration, that wisdom or knowledge which is to be gained by the diligent cultivation of the natural faculties, to save man the fatigue and labour of the acquirement. Those upon whom he has most richly bestowed the gifts of spiritual wisdom have been most careful to cultivate their natural endowments. [156]

Both Paul and Moses were learned before they were inspired, but God did not supersede the use of the powers of the mind by the higher gift of the Spirit. The providential dealings of God are adapted to the laws of the human mind, and in the government of his creatures he never violates the principles which he has established.

The occupation of the shepherd was at length to be abandoned. By oppression and suffering and ignominious exactions, the children of Israel were prepared to leave their homes—the land in which they had dwelt for centuries—and venture across the sea and into the desert. When we remember that husbandry had been the national occupation, when we consider how strong is the instinct which binds man to the land of his birth and the graves of his fathers, and how strong is that bond which attaches one to the spot he has cultivated, to the land he has ploughed and [157]

sowed and reaped, we cannot wonder at the coercion needful to rouse a people whose energies were all depressed, and who had been held in check and kept stationary for ages.

But the people were ready to depart. The oppression of Pharaoh had prepared the way for the display of the Divine faithfulness and power. Jehovah sent his ambassador from the desert to the court of the King of Egypt, to demand their freedom. During his long exile, most who had known Moses in his early days, had passed away; and the few that were left would hardly recognise in the shepherd of the desert, with his staff for his badge of office—bearing the marks of toil and exposure, of deep thought and solitary meditation—the young and gallant prince, the courtier and the warrior of former days. She who had cherished him had probably been laid in the tomb of her royal race, and the name and the memory of Moses may have been forgotten in the palace and the court. Yet there he stood, before the throne which might have been his seat, the ambassador of the King of kings, bearing the stern message of Jehovah—"Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness." Yet wo after wo was denounced and executed—pledge after pledge given and violated—and not until one long wail over the dead and dying resounded through the land were the children of Israel permitted to leave the land of Egypt. The loss of three millions of subjects, of their labour, their tribute, and the removal of all their personal property, would weaken and impoverish the kingdom. Every motive of policy and pride urged the monarch to resist the demand, and thus he suffered the penalty due to his contumelious defiance of the God of Israel, while the judgments inflicted upon him strengthened the faith of the Israelites. The expulsion of the Moors and of the Jews from Spain, the banishment of the Huguenots from France, furnish similar though not parallel cases, in modern ages; and these show that the loss of peaceful, industrious subjects to a kingdom is like taking the life-blood from the system. Centuries have passed, yet these nations have not recovered—and thus Egypt must long have felt her loss. [158] [159]

After the tribes of Israel had passed through the Red Sea, the sister of Moses again appears before us. When he poured forth that chant of triumphant thanksgiving—the oldest song of nations—Miriam gave a response worthy of the sister of the leader of the hosts encamped before the Lord. With timbrel she led the daughters of Israel in the dance. And well might the prophetess of Israel teach the dance of ancient Egypt to the daughters of her people on this occasion. The representations preserved in painting and sculpture show that this was not the gay and voluptuous movement of modern days, but rather a succession of graceful gestures, regulated by music, expressive of joy and emotion. Thus the maidens of Israel offered praise and adoration; nor was it unseemly in the warlike monarch of after ages thus to worship before the ark of the Lord, although his pious act provoked the ridicule of the daughter of Baal. [160]

From this time until the day of her death, Miriam is found co-operating with her brothers in their designs and efforts. However the earlier years of her life had passed, she had attained to a high distinction among her people. While she seems to have neither claimed nor exerted authority, her rank and position, in her sphere, were as well defined and as elevated as that of her brothers. Throughout the whole narrative we find proofs of the high consideration with which she was regarded. [161]

While in early life her influence as a sister had refined and softened the rudeness and roughness of their boyhood and youth, and similar associations with the brothers in mature years had enlarged her mind and imparted intelligence and strength to her understanding.

During the long sojourn in the wilderness, Miriam, "the prophetess of Israel," was probably the counsellor of the mothers and the instructress of the daughters of her people; while between the sister and the brothers there ever seems to have subsisted the most tender, confidential friendship. [162]

But, alas for imperfect woman! There was a time in which the dark passions and malignant tempers of our evil nature so triumphed in the hearts of Miriam and Aaron, that they arrayed themselves against Moses. The dissension which troubled the camps of their leaders threatened to spread and involve the multitude of Israel in all the evils of rebellion and civil war.

During his exile, Moses had married the daughter of the priest of Midian. The descendant of Abraham, Jethro was a worshipper of the God of his fathers, and we have recorded proofs of his piety and wisdom. Yet the marriage of Moses was not apparently in accordance with the views either of his brother or sister. There is a selfish tenderness sometimes exhibited, which leads the dependent mother or single sister to regard with jealousy one who claims a closer tie, and Miriam may not have been free from the infirmities of weaker natures. Yet the notices, slight as they are, of the "Ethiopian" woman, perhaps impress few minds favourably; and we cannot but feel that in herself she may not have been all that the friends of the lawgiver of Israel could have wished in a wife. Bred in the seclusion of the wilderness, she was probably deficient both in the intelligence and the accomplishments which distinguished Miriam. And Miriam and Aaron seem at last to have cherished feelings of bitterness toward their sister-in-law, which were fast extending to the brother himself. [163]

They evidently disliked the foreigner. They may have compared the toil-worn daughter of Midian with the high-bred maidens of Egypt, who in former days would have welcomed the addresses of one numbered with the princes of Egypt, or with the daughters of his own people, as offering an alliance more worthy the ruler of Israel; and Miriam, elevated by the distinction conferred upon her as the prophetess of Israel, conscious of superiority in all feminine accomplishments, seems to have forgotten the love of a sister and to have lost the humility befitting a woman. Domestic bitterness was fast preparing the way for political disaffection, and the dark clouds which had [164]

gathered around the tents of the leaders threatened to burst upon the whole camp of Israel.

Then Jehovah himself interposed. As the principal offender, the prophetess of Israel was publicly rebuked before all the congregation of the Lord; and then, as a leper, expelled from the camp, shut out from all human associations, in shame and solitude, Miriam, diseased and suffering, lay for seven days. In this time she doubtless humbled herself and repented of her sin. Yet, during this interval, the vast multitude showed their respect by remaining stationary; and while Aaron confessed their sin, Moses interceded for his faulty, erring, but still be loved sister. [165]

If the conduct and fault of Miriam are to be censured and deplored, it is to be confessed that it was not peculiar to the sister of the leaders of the hosts of the Lord. Women of later ages, conscious of intellectual superiority, elevated by position, or merely distinguished by usefulness, have sometimes been proud enough to despise the inferior of their own sex, and to arrogate to themselves the power allotted to man; and their awakened pride and vanity have introduced strife and confusion into the counsels of those who were appointed to guide the people of God.

There is meaning in this record of the faults of those whose hearts had been, from infancy to age, knit together. While God has implanted the natural and domestic affections, they are still to be guarded, cherished, and cultivated. The jealousies, the petty strifes of domestic life, the little dislikes, the unguarded tempers of those who dwell together, have sometimes alienated hearts that have been united from childhood. The love that has grown strong by the mutual endurance of oppression, toil, privation, and danger, has been turned to gall by the infusion of the constant droppings of domestic strife. Pure, unselfish love is the spontaneous growth of a holy heart. It must be nurtured and tended, or it will wither and die in our corrupt nature. [166]

The afflictions and punishments which harden the hearts of those who reject God, bring such as love his laws and character to submission and penitence. Miriam was restored to her former usefulness, probably better fitted for her high position, while the hearts of the brothers seem united anew to each other and to her; and the authority of Moses, vindicated by God, was strengthened by his own forbearing love and disinterested gentleness. And from thenceforth, while a due subjection was observed, there seems to have been an entire co-operation between them. [167]

Miriam died in the wilderness of Zin, and the brothers buried her. There is a peculiar sadness in this separation, occurring, as it evidently did, not long before the close of their various pilgrimages.

As we follow the inspired narrative, we are naturally impressed by the care with which Jehovah selects and prepares those whom He intends as the instruments of advancing the welfare of his people and his own glory; and while this may be more clearly traced in the case of the highly distinguished legislator and prophet of Israel, we may be assured that it extends not less certainly to the lowest and the humblest. [168]

The influences by which the lawgiver of Israel was so early surrounded, we are willing to accept as a divine attestation to the power and value of female culture in the formation of the character.

Three women are brought distinctly before us, as connected with the early history of Moses. The mother's high duty and privilege it was (as it ever is) to instil into his opening mind those great truths and first principles which are at the foundation of all excellence. Had the nurse of Moses been an Egyptian idolatress, the character of the man had doubtless been very different. While Moses owed all his worldly advancement to the princess of Egypt, he derived other advantages from being brought under the familiar influence of one who preserved, amid the corruptions of a court, the best sympathies of our nature. A knowledge of human character and a power of adaptation to all the circumstances of his eventful life were thus imparted, and which could be hardly elsewhere acquired, yet they were very needful to one who was to fill the office allotted to him. [169]

God has graciously ordered that while the parents and guardians are to pass away, there are early ties which are enduring. Where families are properly regulated, added years strengthen the bonds of natural affection. Through all the vicissitudes of his life, the brother and sister of Moses clung to him. We first see Miriam watching the cradle-ark in which the infant was concealed, and she never appears except some event in his career brings her into view. Yet, through their long lives she was his companion and helper, participating in his labours, soothing his sorrows, and aiding and encouraging him in his work. She is a type of a large class—we mean the daughters and the sisters who are not wives. Her life shows that a woman may be honourable, useful, distinguished, and happy, and yet remain single—that the holy duties of the wife and the mother are not the only duties. How many homes would be comparatively unblest but for the presence of a dutiful daughter or a loving sister! How largely our own age is indebted to women as teachers; women, who, like the prophetess of Israel, while assisting their brothers to proclaim the oracles of God, devote themselves to the instruction of their own sex, and bless men by instructing women! [170]



DEBORAH—THE INFLUENCE OF WOMAN.

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The book of Judges gives a concise view of the people of Israel for a period of four hundred years, extending from the death of Joshua to the birth of Samuel.

It is peculiarly interesting as showing how God deals with the nations of the earth in visiting national sins with national punishments. It has ever been the painful office of the historian to record the crimes and misfortunes of mankind, and to present the outbreaks of society rather than to note its gradual advance and improvement, or to dwell upon the periods of peaceful prosperity. Like the records of a court of justice, it presents the criminals and the offences and those implicated, while the thousands of peaceful citizens are never brought to view. The flow of human life is, like that of a mighty river, unmarked during its mild course; but when it bursts its bounds and overflows its channel and spreads a wide destruction, it is watched with interest and its desolating ravages are all recorded.

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Of the many women who have attained honour and celebrity amidst the intrigues of courts and cabinets and the revolutions of empires, few have retained the purity and the peculiar virtues of their sex. Deborah seems to have united the sagacity and courage of man to the modest virtues of woman. She appears before us affecting no pomp, assuming no state. The wife of Lapidoth—one known only as the husband of Deborah, but thus known never to be forgotten—she abode with her husband in their own dwelling, under that palm-tree distinguished, when Samuel wrote this book, as "the palm of Deborah," between Ramah, where Rachel died, and Bethel, where Jacob worshipped. "And all the children of Israel came up to her there for judgment."

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The people of Israel had departed from God and from the laws of Moses, and for twenty years they had been mightily oppressed by Jabin. During this long period no priest called the people to repentance, no prophet was commissioned to promise them relief.

We may imagine Deborah dwelling among her people, a devout, strong-minded, enlightened woman. She saw their sins, she participated in their trials, and she warned those around her of the evil of departing from Jehovah. She recalled His past acts of judgment and of mercy. She was well acquainted with the laws of Moses, and she recognised in the punishment of the people the fulfilment of prophecy.

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The influence of such a woman—a woman instructed in the religion of Jehovah—a woman of faith and of prayer—would be felt, first, in her own family, or in her immediate circle of friends; and then would commence the reformation and the repentance and putting away of past sins and the return to the God of Israel. And as the influence spread, the circle extending, the whole nation would seem to have been affected, and they naturally resorted to one whose wisdom and piety were so well established, when any questions of their law, either civil or religious, were to be settled. Thus the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. They came to her—for her feet

abode within her own dwelling. Her influence extended throughout all the borders of her land, but her presence still blest her own house. The prophetess of Israel was still the wife of Lapidoth, and her only authority was that of piety, wisdom and love. A more beautiful instance of a woman's true, legitimate influence cannot be given. Quietly, unostentatiously exercised, it penetrated through the nation and brought them back to Jehovah, and prepared the way for the removal of their yoke. [175]

For many years she was doubtless employed in reclaiming and instructing her people. Through this influence the children of Israel were prepared to assert their liberty; and then Deborah was inspired to call upon "Barak the son of Abinoam," to gather an army, and take his station on Mount Tabor, where the Lord would deliver the enemies of Israel into his hands. She did not propose to attend—certainly not to lead—the army; but, giving her message, her counsel and her prayers, would still abide under the palm-tree and remain with her husband. But the appointed general knew so well the value of her presence in inspiring the people with confidence, and felt so much the need of her prayers, that he refused to go unless she sanctioned the expedition with her attendance. "And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, I will go; but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go." [176]

Thus appealed to, the answer was immediate: "I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour, for the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hands of a woman."

Mount Tabor, chosen for the encamping-place of the army of Barak, still rises like a tall cone in the vast plain of Esdraelon, which, stretching across the land to the sea, has since been the battle-ground of nations. From the wide plain on its lofty summit, Deborah and Barak could look over almost all the land. The view of the hills of Judea, of the sea of Tiberias, and of a country of wide extent, still repays the toil of those who climb to its summit. [177]

But since the days of Deborah and of Barak, Tabor is generally supposed to have witnessed another scene. The Man of grief, who bore our sins and took upon himself our sorrows, climbed its steep ascent with his favoured disciples—And Moses and Elias appeared unto him there, and there "they talked with him." Of what? Not of the battle of Deborah and Barak with Sisera—although they stood where the leaders of Israel had watched the hosts of their enemies encompassing them. It was a converse of high things, not meet for us to know. And there he was transfigured before his wondering disciples, and his "rayment became exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth can white them." And there was a cloud that overshadowed them, and a voice out of the cloud, This is my beloved Son—hear him. Alas! the Divine command has been ill obeyed. Tabor yet retains the remains of a fortress and preserves the marks of warfare; but no trace of the meeting there of the great lawgiver and reformer of Israel with Him who came both to fulfil and to abolish. No temples have yet been there erected to Him whose mission was far above all who were sent either to announce or prepare for his forthcoming. [178]

From Mount Tabor the leaders and hosts of Israel watched their enemies gathering from afar and encompassing them. With the chariots of iron, so much dreaded by the Israelites, came the archers, and the spearmen, and the multitude that were with them—all assembled to surround and to destroy the allies of Barak. [179]

But when Deborah gave the signal, "Up! for this is the day in the which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hands: is not the Lord gone out before thee?" Barak went from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men. The victory was complete—"Jehovah triumphed, His people were free." The hosts of the enemy were vanquished. The river Kishon, that ancient river, swept them away. And the victory was celebrated by a song of most triumphant, yet grateful exultation, in a strain of the loftiest, purest poetry, such as the prophets and psalmists of Israel alone could pour forth:

—
Praise ye the LORD for the avenging of Israel,
When the people willingly offered themselves.
Hear, O ye kings!
Give ear, O ye princes!
I, even I, will sing unto the LORD;
I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel.
LORD, when thou wentest out of Seir,
When thou marchedst out of the field of Edom,
The earth trembled, and the heavens dropped,
The clouds also dropped water. [180]
The mountains melted from before the LORD,
Even that Sinai from before the LORD God of Israel.
In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath,
In the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied,
And the travellers walked through byways.
The inhabitants of the villages ceased,
They ceased in Israel,
Until that I Deborah arose,
That I arose a mother in Israel.
They chose new gods;
Then was war in the gates:
Was there a shield or spear seen

Among forty thousand in Israel?

My heart is toward the governors of Israel,
That offered themselves willingly among the people.
Bless ye the LORD!

Speak,
Ye that ride on white asses,
Ye that sit in judgment,
And walk by the way!

They that are delivered from the noise of archers in the place of drawing
water,

There shall they rehearse the righteous acts of the LORD,
Even the righteous acts toward the inhabitants of his villages in Israel:
Then shall the people of the LORD go down to the gates.

Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, utter a song!
Arise, Barak!

And lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Abinoam.
Then he made him that remaineth have dominion over the nobles among the
people:

The LORD made me have dominion over the mighty.
Out of Ephraim was there a root of them against Amalek;
After thee, Benjamin, among thy people;
Out of Machir came down governors,
And out of Zebulun they that handle the pen of the writer.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
Even Issachar, and also Barak:
He was sent on foot into the valley.

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For the divisions of Reuben
There were great thoughts of heart.
Why abodest thou among the sheepfolds,
To hear the bleatings of the flocks?
For the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead abode beyond Jordan:
And why did Dan remain in ships?
Asher continued on the sea shore,
And abode in his breaches.
Zebulun and Naphtali were a people that jeopardated their lives
Unto the death in the high places of the field.

The kings came and fought,
Then fought the kings of Canaan
In Taanach by the waters of Megiddo;
They took no gain of money.
They fought from heaven;
The stars in their courses fought against Sisera.
The river Kishon swept them away,
That ancient river, the river Kishon.
O my soul, thou hast trodden down strength.
Then were the horsehoofs broken
By the means of the prancings, the prancings of their mighty ones.

Curse ye Meroz! said the angel of the LORD,
Curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof;
Because they came not to the help of the LORD,
To the help of the LORD against the mighty.

Blessed above women
Shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be,
Blessed shall she be above women in the tent!
He asked water, and she gave him milk;
She brought forth butter in a lordly dish.
She put her hand to the nail,
And her right hand to the workmen's hammer;
And with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head,
When she had pierced and stricken through his temples.
At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down:
At her feet he bowed, he fell:

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Where he bowed, there he fell down dead.
The mother of Sisera looked out at a window,
And cried through the lattice,
Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarry the wheels of his chariots?
Her wise ladies answered her,
Yea, she returned answer to herself,
Have they not sped? have they not divided the prey;
To every man a damsel or two;
To Sisera a prey of divers colors,

A prey of divers colors of needlework on both sides,
Meet for the necks of them that take the spoil?
So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD!
But let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.

One such strain preserved from any other ancient nation would establish their claims to the highest order of poetic genius, and lead to the most industrious and painful research for all that could throw light upon their literature. It comes over the soul now like the full burst of martial music. It stirs the blood and quickens the pulses with its strain of triumph, while it melts us to pity, as it brings before us so graphically, with such exquisite power—yet such slight allusion—the distress and desolation of Israel. It is a finished picture of the age. We see the judges, those that ride on white asses (still reserved for royal stables) that walk by the way; while it gives us a full character of Sisera and the mother who trained him. We see the mother—haughty, proud, avaricious, surrounded by "her wise ladies," who are flatterers rather than counsellors—ready to exult in the rapine and plunder of the army of her son; her natural fears awakened by his delayed return, yet hushed and soothed by the enumeration of the spoil. No feeling of pity softening the love of vengeance,—the desire for the plunder of a conquered people engrossing all. [183]

And in Sisera we see the proud, cruel, licentious spoiler—all the powers of his evil nature called into exercise by success and the long indulgence of every evil passion and gross appetite—arrogant, oppressive and cruel in success; abject, cowardly and overreaching in adversity. We can well imagine the state of an oppressed people ruled by such a man at the head of a licentious soldiery. And harsh as may seem some of the expressions of Deborah, in her joyous outbursts of praise and thanksgiving, they arise from the ineffable miseries, the deep degradation, the oppressive cruelties, to which all the daughters of Israel would have been exposed had he been triumphant; and a mother in Israel might well exult in a deliverance from one whose desolating track was marked by lust and carnage. [184]

We do not love to dwell on the treachery of Jael—we do not feel called upon to justify the act, although Deborah might well rejoice in the deliverance of her people from so stern a foe, so foul an oppression. Sisera appears as abject in the hour of defeat as he had been insolent and arrogant and cruel in the hour of triumph. [185]

After Israel was restored to liberty we hear no more of Deborah; but "the land had rest forty years." She again returns to her own sphere, to the unostentatious, yet all-pervading usefulness of domestic life. No honours, no triumphs, no statues were awarded to her. No monuments seem to have been erected to her memory. The palm-tree was her fitting memorial; delighting the eye, affording shade, shelter and nourishment; asking and securing nought from man, watered by the dew and rain of heaven, and rejoicing in the beams of the sun—still pointing to heaven while sheltering those beneath it.

Jehovah seems to permit such examples to stimulate woman to usefulness and to vindicate their capacity; and thus there ever have been and are still Deborahs—mothers in Israel—those who, dwelling under their own roof, in the seclusion of domestic life, yet send forth an influence which extends far and wide. [186]

The sound, rational piety of such women, and their lives of humble faith, of prayer, and of consistent usefulness, have often awakened a high tone of religious feeling and led to extensive revivals of pure religion.

Without departing from their allotted sphere, without forgetting the delicacy and proprieties demanded from their sex, they have been greatly instrumental in elevating the moral and religious standard of a community by their faithfulness in reproving the erring and reclaiming the backsliding, while by their kindly sympathy and effectual co-operation, they have aided, encouraged, and, by their prudent, judicious counsel, guided—the appointed leaders of Israel.



JEZEBEL.

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lthough the family of Jeroboam were soon swept from the throne of Israel, yet those who succeeded still pursued the policy by which he had been governed; and through all the contention and bloodshed which marked the reigns of different dynasties, they all persisted in the idolatry established by him. "They all did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin, wherewith he made Israel to sin." But of Ahab, the son of Omri, it is written that "he did more to provoke the God of Israel than all that were before him." He pursued the path which had been marked out by his predecessors when he married, and he found in his wife an efficient aid. By the strength of her mind, by the energy of her character, by the introduction of an idolatry at once more

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corrupt and more ensnaring, she did more to complete and seal the apostasy of Israel than all who had gone before her.

The name of Jezebel has descended to us as one of the most opprobrious epithets which can be applied to a woman. Little did the haughty queen who bore it imagine what a reproach and offence it was to become for future ages, in unknown lands, and among unborn nations.

We think of her always as old, withered, thirsting for blood, and incapable of the finer sentiments and all the softer emotions of human kind. There was a time in which she shone as the centre of a splendid and luxurious court, where minstrels sang to her and poets praised her and princes flattered her, while statesmen confessed her influence and cabinets adopted her plans. Fascinating, artful, able, ambitious, and unprincipled, she may be regarded as chief among many of the most celebrated of this class of her sex of ancient or modern days.

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There have been queens, not of heathen lands and barbarous Asia, but of refined and christianized Europe, upon whose memories rest quite as dark shadows as those which cover the character of the Queen of Israel. It is sad to remember how many of the most atrocious acts which disgrace the annals of our race are to be traced to the influence of female ambition, jealousy, hate, or revenge. Larger possessions than that of the vineyard of Naboth have been obtained by perjury and blood; and few modern courts could consistently condemn the principles or the policy by which the monarchs of Israel attempted to consolidate and perpetuate their dominion. In the estimation of many statesmen and many historians, greatness has sanctified all the means by which power is either to be attained or preserved, and the splendour of the court has fully atoned for all the oppression of the people.

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While she was fitted to co-operate with her husband, and ready to promote his designs and to embrace the policy which had guided the court of Israel, she soon assumed and ever maintained that influence which the stronger mind, the more powerful will, ever exerts over the inferior and

weaker. Through all his reign, Ahab ever deferred to her; and while she goaded him onward in his career of crime, she stimulated and upheld him by her daring defiance of the commands and threatenings of the prophets of the Lord. She possessed all the energy, power, and constancy which ever belongs to minds of a high order, and which fit them for greatness in virtue or crime—insuring widespread usefulness or leading to desperate wickedness. She never was turned from her course. She never faltered, trembled, or hesitated in the pursuit of her object. She witnessed, unawed and unmoved, miracles of judgment and of mercy. She saw un pitying a land consumed by drought and a people perishing by famine; and when the parched earth drank the showers of heaven, while she rejoiced, she was neither softened nor made penitent by the blessing. [191]

Ahab could not entirely divest himself of every national characteristic, or the remembrances and associations of his faith and his people. There still clung to him some remains of the fear of the "Lord God of his fathers," some feelings of reverence and awe for the name and worship of Jehovah. No such compunctions troubled Jezebel. When Elijah visited Ahab, the impious monarch quailed before him and trembled at the denunciation of Divine wrath. Jezebel answered his reproofs by scorn and threats, and her menaces drove the prophet from the altar where he had triumphed. [192]

Yet her history is replete with sad interest. While it declares the certain ruin which follows national sins and national corruption, it displays also much of the wonderful forbearance of Jehovah. As we retrace his dealings even with the guilty house of Ahab and the apostate people of Israel, we are reminded of *One* who, ages after, wept over Jerusalem. "Oh, if thou hadst known, in this thy day, the things which belong to thy peace—but now they are hidden from thine eyes."

During the earlier years of the reign of Ahab, while Jezebel was engaged with all zeal and activity in proselyting the people of Israel to the worship of Ashtaroah and Baal, she was constantly resisted by the prophets sent as messengers from Jehovah. And many miracles of mercy and of judgment, wrought before her by the power of the Lord God of Israel, should have convinced her of the truth of His messengers—His indisputable claim to be the God—the Lord God. She resisted all—not from the want of evidence or the power of believing, but from the perverseness of a determined will and a hardened heart. Yet he who styles himself a God merciful and gracious, long strove with her, though at last she provoked him to depart and leave her to her chosen way. [193]

The seizure of the vineyard of Naboth seems to have consummated the iniquity of Jezebel, while it brought all the distinguishing traits of her character into full light.

Judah was a land of rocky hills and narrow though fertile valleys. The possessions of Israel were broader and more luxuriant; and in the beautiful plain of Jezreel the kings of Israel had built their favourite city of Samaria. In that city, Ahab erected the temple consecrated to Baal, and there he maintained four hundred and fifty priests for his service, while the Queen of Israel kept four hundred in the groves consecrated to Ashtaroah. "But the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite was hard by the palace of Ahab, King of Samaria." [194]

The King of Israel desired the vineyard of Naboth, either to enlarge his grounds or to add to their beauty and variety. Yet, despotic and unprincipled as he was, the laws of possession were so fixed, the rights of property so established, that, on the refusal of Naboth to sell his inheritance, he dared not use violence; and he sank into sullen despondency.

It has ever been characteristic of wives like Jezebel to maintain their ascendancy by arts and blandishments, and by ministering to every corrupt propensity of their husbands. With the watchfulness of a devoted wife, she saw the vexation of her husband. [195]

"Why is thy countenance so sad?"

"And he said unto her, Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, Give me thy vineyard for money; or else, if it please thee, I will give thee another vineyard for that."

Naboth had said, God forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.

The faithful Israelite may have recoiled from the thought of its passing into the hands of the unholy worshippers of Baal and Ashtaroah and being polluted by their orgies. But Ahab did not give the denial in its full force. He represents Naboth as simply refusing. "I will not give thee my vineyard."

We seem to see the actors before us, in the spirited, yet simple narration, as it proceeds. Ahab, heavy, sullen, morose—with clouded brow and furrowed cheek. Jezebel, with her flashing eye, her queenly gait, her haughty aspect, and all the workings of pride and craft and ambition expressed in her faded but still striking features. With what utter contempt would she look upon the husband who sank into despondency because he had not the skill to devise, or the will to perpetrate, the iniquity which would insure the attainment of his desires! [196]

"Dost thou govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry. *I* will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

And a darker plot, or one more artfully devised, has seldom been unravelled among all the iniquitous intrigues of courts and statesmen. Naboth was doubtless a true worshipper; and for once Jezebel professed all honour to the laws of Jehovah. He was arraigned and tried by the laws of Moses—long trampled upon and disused. And all the solemnities of religion were resorted to, to aid her plans and advance her purpose. [197]

Falsely arraigned, accused, and condemned, Naboth was executed, and his sons perished with him. The hands of his brethren were imbrued in their blood. She who managed the plot found other agents to execute her designs. With impious hypocrisy, she insulted heaven by ordaining a solemn fast, for God and the king had been blasphemed. These transactions display the deep depravity of the Queen of Israel, while they show the influence of her character and example upon her people. The very ministers of justice were made the abettors of her guilt; and law, with all its formalities and solemnities, was made to sanction crime. How many sins were committed to gratify one idle, covetous desire! God was insulted and defied and blasphemed; justice was corrupted; and falsehood, perjury, and murder were all used to accomplish the wicked will of Jezebel. And how many victims have been thus arraigned, and perished thus, in later days! This deed awoke the vengeance of Jehovah. Even as Ahab took possession of his blood-stained field, the prophet of the Lord met him and denounced the doom of the perpetrators of the dark crime. All were to perish, and all were to die deaths of blood and shame. Husband, wife, parents, and children—all, to the latest generation, were to be cut off—to be rooted out of the earth as an abominable stock, and to rot in the sight of the heavens. Ahab humbled himself, as he received the message of the prophet, and showed an outward reverence: and his doom was so far softened that the destruction of the family was not immediate: but Jezebel seems still as bold and unmoved as ever. Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah, entered into alliance with Ahab, and visited his court to witness the splendour and share the hospitalities of Jezebel; and while both were warring against Syria, Ahab was slain in battle.

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Jezebel doubtless would have scouted the folly of those who saw the fulfilment of both prophecy and sentence in the dogs licking the blood from the chariot and the armour, as they were washed in the pool, which probably was on the lands of Naboth; yet she might have foreseen thus her certain fate—and as Ahab had died, so she should die. Her doom was yet deferred. She long survived her husband, and prosperity and such honours as attend the prosperous were her's. She was the daughter, wife, and the mother of kings. Her sons ruled Israel. Her daughter sat on the throne of Judah. She dwelt in royal state at Jezreel, and enjoyed possessions which had been obtained by revolting crimes. Ahab had died a bloody death. Jehoshaphat was gathered to his fathers; the King of Syria perished by the hands of his servant; and Elijah was taken up to heaven—but Jezebel still lived.

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What were the occupations of her old age? Was she still busy, restless, and intriguing? Or did the past haunt her with dark remembrances of shame and crime, and the avenging future cast its shadow over her soul? Did the stern decree of the prophet ring in her ears, and late remorse drive her to the dark cruelties of her bloody idolatry, in the idle hope of expiation? Such an old age could not have been happy. She was left to fill up the measure of her iniquity, while memory told of past sins, and conscience whispered of the coming retribution, and the avenging justice of heaven hung like a dark cloud over her guilty house. Past the season of pleasure, deprived of the power she had so abused, without the honour and sacred reverence due to virtuous age, she may have had a foretaste of her future retribution, though surrounded by all the splendour of royalty, with trembling and abject slaves ministering to all her wants.

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One son after another quietly took possession of the throne of Israel, and Jezebel may have derided the prophecy of Elijah; yet the sentence, long delayed, was fully executed. The hour of foretold vengeance arrived. In one day, the King of Israel was dethroned and murdered, and the race of Ahab was swept from the face of the earth. The last act of her life was worthy of Jezebel herself,—of the Queen of Israel in the days of her prime. She heard of the death of Jehoram and of the insurrection of Jehu. Neither the timidity of a woman nor the yearnings of a mother had a place in her soul. In the hour of carnage, surrounded by all the horrors of death, the pride of her nature prevailed, and all the daring of her character was displayed. She forgot neither the proprieties due to her rank nor the embellishments needful for her person. With the vanity of the woman and the pride of a queen, "she painted her face and tired her head," and then haughtily presenting herself before the murderer of her children, she uttered a maddening taunt and defiance. By the hands of her servants she was cast from the windows of the palace of Israel into the very grounds which had been the vineyard of Naboth; and as she was dashed to the earth, the wheels of the chariot of the destroyer of her race passed over her, and the feet of the horses trampled upon her. "And the dogs ate Jezebel by the walls of Jezreel." Thus her doom was accomplished!

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There have been many like her. Her crimes have been sometimes equalled in atrocity. Her ruling passions were pride and ambition; and she doubtless clung to the idols of her land from the unbounded license their worship gave to sensuality, and the opportunities it afforded, in its feasts and festivals, for display and gayety. [203]

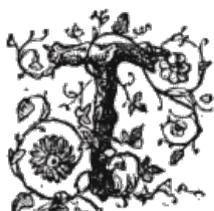
But she clung more tenaciously to her idolatry from motives of self-interest and national aggrandizement. It was the test of loyalty for Israel. It was in perfect consistency with such a character to turn away from all evidence and to reject what she did not wish to believe. In the expressive language of the Bible, she "hardened her heart;" and doubtless, like skeptics of later days, she could ascribe what she could not disprove to the working of natural causes, or to the arts of priestcraft.

We can all stifle the convictions of conscience and condemn the principles which conflict with our interest or our inclination; and there are in every station unconscious imitators of the Queen of Israel. [205]



ATHALIAH.

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he pious king of Judah not only formed a political alliance with Israel, but he even permitted, and probably encouraged, his son, and the heir to his throne, to marry the daughter of the impious Ahab and the idolatrous Jezebel. Jehoshaphat saw not the Queen of Israel as we see her—as unlovely as she was unholy. Dazzled by the splendour of her court, won by her grace and queenly bearing, he may have overlooked her crimes. The most unprincipled have sometimes carefully and successfully cultivated much that gives grace and attraction to social life. Some, whose hearts have been utterly selfish and callous, and whose lives have been one dark record of crime and cruelty, have yet shone as the [207]



centres of splendid circles, diffusing all around them pleasure and gayety. And men, themselves unstained, have been won by these fascinations to a close association with those whose principles were worthy only of reprobation, and whose association should have been shunned as in the last degree contaminating.

The intimacies between those who love and worship God and those who reject him are ever full of danger. And while the courtiers of Ahab and the flatterers of Jehoshaphat may have applauded the liberal policy of the King of Judah, and his freedom from the bigotry of the prophets who would reform Israel, he was pursuing a course which was to involve his family in calamity and bring corruption into his kingdom. Jerusalem and Samaria were not very remote from each other, and the kings of Israel and Judah seem at this period to have maintained frequent personal intercourse: an intercourse which appears not to have elevated the moral character of Israel, while it surely led to the deterioration of the piety of Judah; for when godly persons mingle freely with the impious,—especially if this intercourse originates from mere motives of ambition or worldly expediency,—the former will be much more ready to sink to the level of the worldling than to raise the worldling to their own.

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The influence of this association with the depraved court of Israel doubtless had its effect upon the heart of Jehoshaphat. He was not drawn into idolatry, but he probably was less zealous in the service of Jehovah and in the vindication of his ways. He may have rather sympathized with the monarchs of Israel in their attempts to establish their own faith and maintain their own authority, than with the persecuted people of Israel in their efforts to preserve the worship of their fathers. While he regretted the idolatry of Jezebel, he may have censured what would be called the uncourtly intolerance or the bigoted zeal of the prophets, who uttered such denunciations and threatenings against the reigning family. Perhaps he pointed out to the few faithful Israelites whom he might meet in the train of Ahab or at the court of Israel the propriety of a more gentle mode or a more conciliating policy. As the friend of Ahab, he betrayed the cause of God, and upheld his iniquities. In all the persecutions they sustained, we do not find that the prophets of the Lord ever sought a refuge among their brethren of Judah. Hardly could they have expected shelter and protection from the king who was allying his own family with the house of Ahab. They found shelter among the heathen; they were nourished by miracles; they were hid in the coverts of the rocks, and were fed by ravens, while Jehoshaphat and his court were rejoicing in the alliance of Jehoram with Athaliah—the royal son of Judah with the royal daughter of Israel; and the worshippers of Jehovah and the devotees of Ashtaroth and Baal were mingled in their train.

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There might have been heavy forebodings and low, suppressed murmurs among those who remembered the statutes of the Lord, and who recalled his dealings with his people; but the multitude could rejoice in the splendour and the festivities of the occasion; the court could exult in the pomp and display; and wise politicians could talk of the benefits to the two countries of speaking one language, springing from a common origin, and preserving their own national integrity, and yet presenting one united front to the common enemy. And Jehoshaphat may have hailed this marriage as the master-stroke of his policy, while religiously-disposed courtiers whispered that a scion of Israel, transplanted to Judah and nurtured by Jehoshaphat, under the influences of Zion, must indeed prove a plant of righteousness in this garden of the Lord.

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Did Jezebel fear this? Did this strong-minded, politic, crafty woman feel that her daughter was placed under influences which might draw her from the idols of her mother, and make her recreant to the policy of her father's house?

Jezebel was too strong in the consciousness of her own power, to fear that her children would oppose her wishes or her plans. All experience proves that the wife exerts a powerful influence upon the character of her husband. Even where she has apparently little mental strength, she may possess great moral power, for evil or for good. This influence pervades her family, and is felt even while it is despised and disavowed. When holy and pure, it is as reviving, strengthening, invigorating as the pure breath of the morning. When it has its source in a selfish, polluted heart, it comes like the midnight miasma or the blast of the desert, prostrating and destroying all over which it passes.

The character of the mother often determines the course and the destiny of her children. She imprints her own moral lineaments upon her offspring. She moulds their habits and she transfuses into them the feelings, motives, and principles which actuate herself. The influence of the mother is often so perpetuated in her daughters that the individual seems multiplied as she is faithfully reflected by them. Where the mental and moral characteristics are marked, they are almost sure to descend; and the character of Jezebel was one to leave its impress.

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Thus we find Athaliah worthy of the stock from which she sprang. She was the true, as she seems to be the only daughter of Jezebel. Though early allied to Jehoshaphat and removed into the kingdom of Judah, she retained all the idolatrous prepossessions of her father's house, and she exhibited all the traits which marked her race. She possessed the qualities which had been so prominently displayed by the course and life of Jezebel. The same desperate will, the same determined energy, the same daring courage and dauntless resolution, and the same proud ambition; and she was even more devoid than her mother of all the kinder feelings, affections, and sympathies.

Jezebel had resolutely crushed all those affections and sympathies of her nature which would be likely to check her progress in her career of crime and power. She had trampled upon all that would obstruct her in the attainment of her object. Yet some of the feelings of the woman, the

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tenderness of the wife, the fondness of the mother, still seem to linger in her proud heart. Unprincipled as she was, she did not abandon herself to utter selfishness. In her most atrocious acts she seems to have had some regard to the aggrandizement of her family and to the gratification of her husband. The daughter was more depraved than her mother. Athaliah was utterly selfish, devoid even of the instinct of natural affection. A character more revolting is not presented to us in the pages of the historian, sacred or profane.

A woman rioting in blood that she might gratify her ambition! A mother destroying her offspring that she might possess their inheritance! Jezebel was a depraved woman, but Athaliah was a monster—a woman destitute of all the feelings of humanity, working all evil, and only evil, from the mere love of self. With selfish desires which absorbed all consideration, and in their intensity prompted to unnatural crimes, having no object in view beyond her personal gratification or aggrandizement, there was not even the extenuation to be offered for Athaliah which could be urged for Jezebel; for the policy of Judea was opposed to idolatry, and in the family of Jehoshaphat she was surrounded by influences most favourable to a virtuous course, and influences which had never rested upon her mother. Under the very shadow of the Temple she perpetrated her most flagrant crimes. [214]

Although the depravity of Jezebel led her to adopt a corrupt religion, to reject a pure and holy worship, and to cling to the dark and cruel rites of heathenism, the voice of conscience was not silenced, the light of the soul was not entirely extinguished. She felt the need of some faith—she clung to the altars of her gods. But Athaliah seems to have sunk into the brutishness of those who own "no God." She seems to have trampled upon all faith, as she violated all obligation—insensible alike to the calls of conscience and the aspirations of devotion. She had no womanly sympathies. She had high mental endowments—she had a powerful will and strong passions—but she had no affections. There have been many Jezebels—but few Athaliahs. The affections compose so large a part of a woman's nature that we disown one who is without them. In her deepest guilt, in her lowest debasement, they still cling to her; and raised to the summit of power, they do not often wholly desert her. [215]

The princess of Israel must have been married at an early age, and she was long restrained by the character of Jehoshaphat from the public display of her wishes and inclinations. While he lived, Judah still retained the outward show of reverence for the God of Israel, and doubtless Athaliah often led her train to the temple of Jehovah; yet the infection of the character and principles of the daughter of Ahab was at work. A poisonous leaven spread through the royal family. The younger princes of Judah were contaminated; and when Jehoshaphat died, this influence of Athaliah was first manifest in the character of Jehoram. It is written of him that "he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, after the house of Ahab, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife, and he did evil in the sight of the Lord." [216]

He commenced his reign by the murder of his brethren, the sons of his father. Jehoshaphat had provided for all his sons, giving them wealth and appointing them to offices of trust, while he left the kingdom to Jehoram. And without pretext or apology, Jehoram put them all to death; and their families were involved, as we may well believe, in their ruin. They were probably proclaimed outlaws, and then murdered wherever found, perhaps while dwelling in perfect security and in profound peace; and with them fell many of the other princes of Judah not so nearly connected with the royal family. The very commencement of his reign, the occasion of so much joyful festivity to the court, was thus marked by crimes which brought utter desolation to the families and terror to the hearts of the people of his kingdom; and we may well presume that the woman who afterwards proved herself so reckless and heaven-defying, prompted to this first crime. She who was herself so ready to commit deeds of blood would be quick to instigate others. [217]

The whole reign of Jehoram was impious and disgraceful. He erected altars on all the hills of Judea, to draw his people into the worship of Baal and Ashtaroah; while he compelled the inhabitants of Jerusalem to join in the corrupt festivals and the abominable rites of this Syrian goddess. [218]

Elijah, the prophet of Israel, was commissioned to reprove Jehoram, and to denounce the impending doom of his house. He was not ordered to present himself at the court of the King of Judah, but to write his message. "There came a writing to Jehoram;" and probably the King of Judah scoffed at the warning, and perhaps referred him to the unexecuted judgments denounced upon the house of Ahab, and to the present prosperity of the family, and the continued stability of the kingdom, as a proof of the fanatical delusion of the pretended prophets of the Lord. Yet the doom of the guilty Jehoram was accomplished even before the woes denounced upon Jezebel were fulfilled. Tributary kingdoms revolted, and in vain he sought to bring them back to obedience. The Philistines and the Arabians made an incursion into Judah, and carried away all his wealth, while they took his family captive; and Jehoram, smitten by a most loathsome and painful disease, died. He was buried without the usual honours paid to royalty. His memory and his person were alike offensive. [219]

Upon the accession of Ahaziah, the next king, the influence of Athaliah is soon recognised. He was the youngest and the only son not carried into captivity. It is said that "his mother's name was Athaliah, the daughter of Omri. He also walked in the way of the house of Ahab, for his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly,"—as wife and mother, alike unholy. "Wherefore he did evil in the sight of the Lord, like the house of Ahab, for they were his counsellors, after the death of his father, to his destruction." [220]

The second son of Ahab had succeeded to the kingdom of Israel, and Jezebel was surrounded by

all the splendours of royalty. Peace and prosperity still attended her family. The death of Naboth and his sons, and the denunciations of the prophet, were probably forgotten, or remembered only to be despised. The royal houses, so closely allied, maintained a familiar intercourse, and the King of Judah was on a visit of sympathy to the King of Israel, who was sick and wounded, when the rebellion of Jehu broke out. It came upon the house of Ahab like a hurricane: in the midst of security and of apparently profound peace, the storm swept over and destroyed them.

While the kings were in the palace of Israel, the rapid approach of a messenger awoke the curiosity rather than the apprehension of the King of Israel. With the rashness of a doomed man, he rushed upon his own destruction. As the messengers, whom he had sent to meet the approaching foes, returned not, the two kings hastened to meet the advancing troop. And they met Jehu by the vineyard of Naboth, and there the King of Israel was slain, while the King of Judah fled, mortally wounded, to Megiddo, where he died. All that belonged to the house of Ahab in Israel perished in this hour of vengeance and righteous retribution. Jehu murdered those of the descendants of Jehoram who fell in his way; and Athaliah hastened to complete the fulfilment of the prophetic doom of her house by herself instigating the murder of all who remained of the royal family of Judah, although they were her own descendants! In her ruthless ambition she destroyed her grandchildren, that she might herself ascend the throne of Judah. She seems to have exulted in the blood and carnage which opened her way to royal power. Unmoved by the fate of her mother, with her sons and her brothers scarce cold in their untimely graves, by her cruel treachery she consummated the destruction of her family; and, stained with blood and polluted by crimes, she seated herself upon the throne of David, and usurped the inheritance of her children! [221] [222]

For eight years Athaliah held this usurped position. No compunctious visitings of conscience seem to have haunted her. She felt neither pity nor remorse. She may have well sustained her ill-gotten power while she resided amidst the pomp and pageantry of royalty. Her resolute despotism seems to have held her subjects in awe, and to have quelled them all into subjection. She had herself wrought the fulfilment of the doom of her race. As the last of Ahab's children, the sword of divine vengeance was suspended over her head, and in the time appointed it fell. She was to die the death of her house—a death of blood. [223]

When the kings of Judah apostatized, while the individuals were punished, the race was spared. God still remembered his covenant with David; and, amid all the sin and desolation of Judah, the line of hereditary descent was unbroken. The root remained, and some scion worthy of the stock sprang from it.

When Athaliah was ingrafted on the stock of royal Judah, she so debased it, that it seemed needful to purify it by cutting off all the branches to the very root. Yet one was saved. And, as if to display his own power and grace, God is at times pleased to select from the families the most apostate and unholy, the instrument of his work and the trophy of his grace. So he made the daughter of Athaliah the nurse and the instructress of him who was to reform the kingdom of Judah. Jehoshabeath, wife of the high-priest of the Lord, seems to have escaped the character and the doom of her family. Her's was a task most difficult. She was called to oppose the depravity of her mother and to thwart her bloody policy, and yet not to appear as her accuser and as hastening the execution of the Divine vengeance. Hard is it to the virtuous child to reprobate the character and course of the unholy parent, and yet preserve the reverence due to the relation. Jehoshabeath appears before us in a light which leaves a most favourable impression. The saviour of the infant heir of Judah, the son of her brother, she cherished, instructed and guarded him. At the proper time the high-priest communicated the secret of the existence of the child to the princes of the land, and the son of Ahaziah was proclaimed king. No assault was made upon Athaliah. She rushed, like others of her family, upon her doom, as if she were infatuated. The tumult of the people, the triumphant strains of sacred and martial music, the clashing of the shields of the soldiers as they bore their king aloft, brought the first tidings of the existence of the last of her race to Athaliah. [224] [225]

The daughter of Jezebel was not easily daunted. Her courage rose in the hour of danger. She had purchased the throne at a price too great readily to relinquish the possession of it. She forced her way through the crowds who surrounded the Temple, and through the bands of soldiers who guarded the young king, until she confronted the child whose brow already bore the crown of Judah—a heavy weight for the infant king. In vain she rent her royal robes, and in vain she cried, "Treason! Treason!" None adhered to her—none followed her—none perished with her. She died by the sword,

"And left a name to other times
Link'd with no virtue, but a thousand crimes." [226]

The history of modern nations is not without examples of similar evils entailed upon those who, professing themselves the heads of a purified church and a reformed faith, choose (from motives of pride or policy) to seek an alliance with the adherents of a dark, cruel, and persecuting superstition. Such a marriage precipitated the Stuarts from the throne of England, cost one king his life, and the family a kingdom; and the marriages of policy among princes, contravening the rules of God's word, are often followed by most disastrous results, and hasten the evils they are contracted to prevent.

In private life, also, the marriage of those who have renounced this world for a higher portion, with the worldly and the ungodly, is generally a source of sin or of sorrow. There can be little [227]

congenial feeling between the spiritual and the earthly; and the servant of God who chooses a wife from the daughters of sin and the devotees of pleasure, places himself in a position of peculiar trial.

The spirit of the wife pervades the household. The husband may rule, but the wife influences. His voice is obeyed, but the wishes of the wife are consulted. Her friends are the welcome guests. His associates gather around his board and claim his leisure hour, but her voice whispers to him in his retirement. She comes between God and his soul. The strongest of men was shorn of his might by the companion of his bosom; the wisest was led into foolishness and idolatry by the influence of a corrupt woman.

We are prone to think of the period to which we have been referring as one of barbarism, and of the nations of Israel and Judah as ignorant and uncivilized. Does it not seem as if the very heavens must have been shrouded and the course of nature changed during the perpetration of such bloody crimes? Does it not seem as if a natural darkness must have overspread the land? And yet it was not so. The sun shone in his brightness, the skies were as serene, the rain and the dew descended, the vine and the olive ripened, and the flowers shed forth their sweetness, and all the bustle and show of life went on, as at other times. The people were oppressed, but the courts of Israel and Judah were splendid and luxurious; and they doubtless boasted of their advancing refinement, even when they were sinking into corruption and depravity. It has ever been the policy of the monarchs who are guilty of the most atrocious crimes, who shrink from no acts of cruelty, to promote that despotism which may banish the remembrance of their enormities, and to dazzle and blind the eyes of their people by the glare and splendour which surrounds their court. And thus these guilty monarchs, by the patronage of the licentious festivals of heathen worship and the alluring rites of a corrupt religion, compelled their people to sin. They drowned the voice of conscience and prevented all reflection.

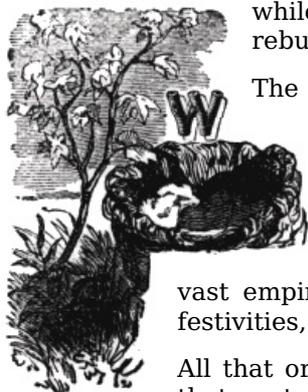
All history has shown us that, as nations have been verging to their ruin, they have yielded themselves to criminal excess and sensual indulgence; and the boasted periods of splendour and high refinement have been but the preludes to long seasons of national calamity or entire overthrow. Thus we may suppose it to have been with the ancient descendants of Israel. The courts were splendid and all the arts were patronized, while the thin veil of refinement was thrown over deeply corrupt manners. The people, departing from a holy faith, were sinking into a sullen debasement, or giving themselves to sensual indulgence and brutal ferocity.

Modern nations have followed in the footsteps of the ancient world. The same idols are still worshipped under other names—the same passions rule the unholy heart.



ESTHER.

When Isaiah wrote, Babylon sat a queen among the nations, in the pride of pomp and power, in the full security of strength; yet he graphically depicted her desolation and foretold her present state,



while he pronounced her doom—a perpetual desolation. She shall never be rebuilt! Her towers are fallen and her site marked by ruins.

The decline of Babylon had begun. It was certain, although slow. Years were to pass before the sentence should be fully executed. At the period, when the transactions recorded in the book of Esther took place, Shushan was the royal city of Persia. We are told that in this—the City of Lilies—the king Ahasuerus held a great feast, probably in celebration of some recent success, or in commemoration of some great national event. He assembled all the princes and nobles of his vast empire, extending from Egypt to India, and gave a feast or succession of festivities, which continued for more than the third of a year.

All that oriental splendour and magnificence could contribute, all the expedients that eastern luxury could desire, to multiply the resources and to heighten the enjoyment of pleasure, were brought to aid the designs of the monarch and to add to the festivities of his court.

Yet motives of policy may have combined with the designs of pleasure. In all ages the despot has sought to blind and dazzle the people by a display of power and magnificence; and the princes and nobles around, from distant provinces, have swelled the retinue of their attendants.

The amusements of monarchs and of courts have, through all varieties of manners and degrees of refinement, been much the same. The ancient Syrian or Persian, like the modern British or French monarch, had his royal parks and forests for hunting.

All nations have patronized the various trials of skill and strength, and the mimic fight has ever been an amusement where war was the great business of life. And the royal pageantry was doubtless intermingled with the religious ceremonies which allowed a license to criminal indulgence and at the same time offered a supposed expiation for crime.

While these employed the day, the games of chance, the wine, the music, the movements of the degraded dancing-girl, and the tricks of the buffoon and the jester, amused the late hours and varied the festive scenes of the night.

The feast was drawing to a close, and, at the termination of this long season of hilarity, Ahasuerus extended the pleasures of the occasion to all classes of his subjects at Shushan.

He threw open his palaces and pleasure-grounds, his parks and gardens—always of vast extent around eastern palaces—and admitted all the citizens to a feast prepared for them. Tents had been erected within the precincts of the palace for the tables—and these tents were furnished with all the luxurious appendages of the east—with white and green and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars; while the beds—the couches around the tables, against which the ancients reclined—were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red and blue, and black and white marble; while they gave them to drink in vessels of gold. Until these last days the princes and nobles alone had participated in the festive scenes; but now, as we have said, all ranks were allowed to share, and the citizens of Shushan, subjects of Ahasuerus, thronged the palace and trod the royal gardens, and, entering the tents, enjoyed all that royalty could offer in ancient Persia—far surpassing in costly splendour and elegance the entertainments of modern courts. And surely the monarch must have had strong confidence in the security of his government and the loyalty of his people, as he thus from day to day, for successive days, flung open to them the recesses of his palace.

While the king thus feasted the men in the gardens and parks of the palace, Vashti, the queen, held a festival for the women within the secluded apartments appropriated to the female part of the royal household. She made them a feast within the house of Ahasuerus; and this queenly entertainment was conducted with all that regard for retirement and decorum which accords with Eastern manners. But whatever the amusements of the queen and her train of attendants, no rumours passed the carefully guarded bounds of the women's apartments. At length the long season of pleasure came to a harmonious close. No outbreak of the people of Shushan, no rising of distant provinces, no plotting of high-born traitors had marred the festal pomp. Yet the season of pleasure is always a period of trial, and the seeds of remorse and repentance are almost invariably sown in the hours of gayety. Amid all this brightness, a dark cloud hung over Ahasuerus. On the seventh and last day, when the heart of the king was merry—when he had forgotten royalty dignity and personal decorum, by sitting too long at the festive board—excited by pride and vanity, and stimulated by wine, he resolved to dazzle the eyes of the people by presenting to their admiration a gem, brighter and more lovely than any which sparkled in the royal crown. To verify his loud boasts of her matchless charms, he sent his chamberlain to bid the queen array herself in that royal attire which befitted her state while it displayed her beauty and proclaimed her rank, and thus present herself, that the assembled multitudes might admire her loveliness and confess his happiness.

In Western lands, and in modern days, this command would convey no idea of shame or impropriety. The royal consort and her train of fair attendants have often graced the presence and shared the honours of the monarch and his court, and added refinement to luxury. But no offer could be more opposed to all ideas of Eastern delicacy and propriety—more degrading to the woman, or more offensive to the queen.

By thus unveiling herself before the crowd, she would sink herself to the level of the most

unworthy of her sex—while the violation of an established usage, in the time of such excitement and excess, might lead to the wildest disorder, and the queen might be exposed to every insult from crowds maddened by wine and ripe for disorder; while the monarch himself might not be able to protect her in a position so strange and unfitting.

The modesty of the woman and the dignity of the queen alike forbade compliance with the strange order—and Vashti might well presume that, in the hour of reflection, when his senses had returned, the monarch would thank her for a prudence which probably alone preserved her dignity and his honour. [239]

But the passions of the king were inflamed. His reason was blinded, and artful courtiers, from motives of intrigue or pique, stimulated his anger. There are ever those who stand ready to administer to unholy passions, and who are watching for the fall of such as are high in place or favour. And still under the influence of wine, the rash monarch, by his own act, placed an inseparable barrier between himself and her whose charms had so lately been his proudest boast, and whose conduct had proved that she well deserved all honour and all affection. Vashti was separated from the king's favour; and flattering sycophants extolled the act of folly, as a measure which gave peace and security to every household in the realm. "All the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small." And thus the day closed by an edict that brought sorrow to many hearts, and desolation even to the gates of the palace. [240]

The excitement was past. The hour of reflection arrived, and "the king remembered Vashti." His resentment was appeased. "He remembered what she had done, and what was decreed against her." That which had been magnified into a crime and had given such deep offence, was now seen to be an act of wisdom and prudence—the result of true modesty, and that deep affection which sought alone the love of her husband, which shrank from the admiration of the crowd, and which ventured to disobey rather than forfeit self-respect and womanly pride—preferring to lose his love rather than expose his honour. An immutable decree—his own—separated him from one lately so beloved, and so truly worthy of high honour.

The darkened and saddened aspect of the monarch declared his late repentance; and those who had precipitated the fall of the queen, to screen themselves, were prompt to devise methods of banishing the remembrance of the divorced Vashti. They would replace her by a new favourite. Yet, so surpassing was her loveliness, and so rare her beauty, that the courtiers could with difficulty find one whose charms might banish from memory the repudiated consort, until they sought through all the provinces of that vast empire for the fairest of the daughters of men. [241]

Hadassah, a daughter of Israel, a descendant of Benjamin, of the house of Kish, the family of Saul, first king of Israel, won the monarch's favour, and was promoted to the place of the disobedient but high-minded Vashti. Esther was an orphan, but she had been carefully guarded and instructed by her kinsman Mordecai; and while we are told that the maiden was exceeding fair, we may believe that her beauty was of a high order, stamped too by intellect and feeling, and that the soul which often sustained and impelled her in her trying exigencies, breathed through her features and animated her form. Yet Ahasuerus merely bowed to the fair shrine. He sought not to awaken the response of the soul that dwelt within. [242]

When the daughter of Israel was placed upon the throne of Persia, and another royal feast proclaimed the triumph of Esther and the happiness of Ahasuerus, the king displayed his royal magnificence by the bestowal of gifts upon his favourites; and the name of Esther was blended with other and higher associations, as, upon her elevation, the taxes of the burdened provinces were remitted and pardons granted to the condemned.

Mordecai, the relative who had supplied the place of parents to Esther, was, as we have said, of the house of Kish. Mordecai was the Jew rather than the Benjamite. His heart was devoted to his country. When the child of his adoption was taken to the palace, Mordecai displayed his wise forethought in cautioning her against making her parentage and kindred known. He had been as a father to her, and a deep interest in the orphan of his care led him, day by day, to watch the gate of the palace—to mingle with the attendants, that he might catch a view of her train or gather tidings of her welfare. And thus, unknown as the relative of the fair queen, or as especially interested in the king, Mordecai was enabled to detect and reveal a plot for the assassination of Ahasuerus. Esther being informed of the plot, disclosed it to the king—the criminals were defeated and punished—but no reward was conferred upon Mordecai. [243] [244]

The passion of Ahasuerus for his fair bride seems to have soon declined. The fickle voluptuary sought new pleasures, and the bride so lately exalted to a throne was no longer an object of envy. Many bitter tears have been shed by the victims of family pride or state policy, when thus allied to greatness and splendour. The sacred rite has often been prostituted to purposes of ambition and selfishness, and has thus become a source of guilt and misery. Esther, in her elevation, may have shed as bitter tears as fell from Vashti in her banishment and disgrace.

Thus each state has its own trials and its own griefs—and it has its peculiar alleviations too. Perhaps the progress of the narrative will show us the source of that influence which seems early to have estranged Ahasuerus from his bride. [245]

Among the courtiers of the king there was the descendant of a race long at variance with the Jews. The Amalekites had been the enemies of the Israelites from the infancy of the nation. When the tribes came up from Egypt, faint and weary in the desert, the Amalekites had fallen upon them and attempted to destroy them; and during a series of ages there had been a war of

extermination between the races. Nor had Amalek been subjected until Saul was raised to the throne and Israel had become a kingdom.

When Israel and Judah had been destroyed or carried captive by the hosts of the Assyrians, the remaining Amalekites seem likewise to have been carried into the east, either as prisoners or allies. And now, from among all his courtiers, Ahasuerus had chosen, as his chief favourite and counsellor, Haman, the son of Hammedatha, a descendant of Agag—that king of Amalek who, as the prisoner of Saul, was condemned to death by Samuel, the judge of Israel. The descendant of a royal line and of an ancient race, Haman was as crafty as he was unprincipled and malignant, and his evil influence seems to have first drawn the king's favour from Esther. He did not know her lineage, but by plunging the king in every excess, by keeping all safe counsellors at a distance, he intended to increase his own influence and perpetuate his own power, while he was accumulating great wealth from the prodigality of his master and from the presents offered as bribes to obtain his favour. [246]

As he did not know the lineage of Esther, he did not persecute her; but as he feared an influence that might compete with his own, he strove to alienate the heart of Ahasuerus from her. Haman was advanced to honours far above all the native princes of the kingdom; even to the first seat in counsel, to the highest honours in the realm, and to constant companionship of the monarch. [247]

As, with trains of slaves and flatterers, he was hastening to the audience of the monarch, or returning loaded with marks of royal favour, he passed Mordecai the Jew, seated alone—unknown, unheeded, without rank or wealth—by the gate of the palace. "Yet Mordecai bowed not, neither did reverence to Haman." The two men seemed to represent to each other their respective nations; as if all the hate and malice of the race, and of long ages of national bitterness, were concentrated in an individual. They met as the Israelite and the Amalekite; and the memories of centuries of aggression and injuries, of shame and defeat, were crowded into the present moment. Mordecai saw in Haman, not only the foe to his race, but the crafty, unprincipled, unholy counsellor, who had already alienated the heart of the monarch from his youthful bride, and whose pernicious influence was spreading blight and corruption, misery and destruction—through an empire. [248]

Every feeling of the Jew, every principle of an upright, sincere heart forbade Mordecai to pay the homage demanded of him by Haman. Every sentiment of national pride, of family honour, of personal dignity, of self-respect, arose to deter the descendant of Israel from showing honour to the hereditary foe of his people and the persecutor of his faith.

Haman, at the same time, saw in Mordecai the descendant of those who had triumphed over his nation and destroyed his ancestors. The descendant of Agag, the captive of Saul, he might naturally vent his indignation upon the tribe that humbled his house and subjected his nation and destroyed his ancestors. The contempt with which Mordecai regarded him roused all the ancient malignity of the Amalekite, and his hot blood called for vengeance. [249]

Yet he thought it a foul shame to lay hands on Mordecai alone. The ruin of one man would not heal his wounded pride. He meditated a deeper and more deadly revenge. He resolves to sweep the remnant of the Jews from the face of the earth!

The proposed plan displays at once all his cruelty and malignity, and all his crafty influence over Ahasuerus, while it proves the king too much immersed in pleasure, or too much subjected to his artful favourite, to regard the welfare of his subjects or the interests of his kingdom.

Superstitious and idolatrous, Haman cast lots day after day, for successive days, that a fortunate one might decide the day to be chosen for the work of death on which he was bent. And this accomplished, he hastened to secure the edict from the king. Surely the monarch must have been sunk in wine and debauchery who could thus unhesitatingly accede to the proposition to murder, in cold blood, thousands of unresisting subjects, when the worst allegation preferred by their enemy was "that their laws were diverse from all people." Yet here was the very principle of religious persecution; and as sanguinary edicts as these, enacted against God's ancient people, have been too often issued in more modern days, and no Mordecai has sat at the gate of the palace, mutely to plead for mercy—no Esther has staked her life upon the attempt to avert the doom! [250]

By the offer of an enormous bribe, to be collected from the plunder of those doomed to death, Haman sought the acquiescence of the king in his scheme. And though he refused the bribe, yet he bade Haman do with the people and their possessions as seemed best to him; giving him his signet ring, he seems to have divested himself of all care and responsibility, and Haman having issued the edict and commanded the couriers to distribute the royal mandate, they both returned to their pleasures. "The king and his counsellor sat down to drink." [251]

No elaborate essay upon the character of Ahasuerus, no analysis of the arts of Haman, could so display the indolent, luxurious, self-indulgent, voluptuous monarch, or so illustrate the secret of the favourite's power. The companion of his pleasures, he was careful to minister to all the sensual indulgence that could lead him to forget his duty and the obligations of right and justice incumbent upon the ruler of a great people.

Of all the cruel and bloody mandates issued by despotic monarchs, and designed to answer either the purposes of private malice or unholy policy, few, if any, have exceeded this which was directed against the ancient people of Jehovah. The Jews who had returned to their own land were included in this proscription, for Judea was at this time a tributary of the Persian empire. [252]

"Then were the king's scribes called, the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded, unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province, according to the writing thereof; and to every people after their language, in the name of King Ahasuerus, was it written, and sealed with the king's ring. And the letters were sent by posts into the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews—both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month." [253]

Thus we see all the machinery of this powerful government put in motion to crush the Jews—a people widely dispersed and weak from their recent captivity and overthrow. As no crime was specified, so there was no offer of pardon or exemption on any terms; while to make it more distinctly understood, the terms which indicated their fate were singularly multiplied. "To *destroy*, to *kill*, to *cause to perish*." And while the murder of a nation was thus made a legal execution, the mode was left to the option of the executioners; and every torment that malignity could devise might be inflicted, while all were stimulated by the promise of the plunder of their victims—"and to take the spoil of them for a prey."

What scenes of horror, of suffering, would have followed the execution of this barbarous edict! The whole empire had probably been deluged in blood—for man, like the inferior animals, seems maddened by the taste of blood—and one cruelty is but the prelude and provocation of another; and in the time of strife, while all were made executioners of the law, private malice would confound others with the proscribed, and few could be safe in the hour of commotion. [254]

When this edict was published, and while Ahasuerus and Haman sat down to indulge in the pleasures of the table, all the city of Shushan was perplexed, confounded, and troubled—wondering what motives, what state policy, what strange conspiracy, had led to this sanguinary enactment against a people long dwelling among them—a nation who had furnished counsellors and ministers to their wisest monarchs.

When Mordecai saw what was done, he rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and cried with a loud and bitter cry. He published—he could not conceal—his grief and terror; and his crafty foe perhaps exulted in his misery. The long struggle between the Amalekite and the Israelite seemed now to be concluded. The fall of the Jews seemed to be sealed. All the power of the Persian empire was arrayed against them. They were prisoners in her different provinces, appointed to execution! All human power and authority and presumption of success was on the side of Haman, and against his intended victims. [255]

Mordecai had no hope on earth. His trust was alone in the God of his fathers—the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob—the God often defied by Amalek. In his distress he presented himself, clothed in sackcloth, at the gate of the royal palace; but no one arrayed in the garb of sorrow might enter the haunts devoted to luxurious pleasure. Yet the sight of his distress and the tones of his deep grief arrested the attention of the attendants of the queen, and her chamberlain reported the circumstances to her. [256]

No tokens of sympathy, no expression of condolence, however grateful, could assuage the grief of Mordecai in this hour of terror and alarm; and even though commanded by the queen, he declined to lay aside the tokens of wo, while he diligently sought to convey to the secluded Esther an account of all the machinations of Haman, and the assurance of the imminent danger to which her nation was exposed, and in which she was involved. He not only sent her a copy of the edict which condemned the Jews, but he charged her to supplicate the king on their behalf.

The young queen must have felt like one awakened from a sleep to find herself upon the brink of a precipice. Her situation was full of danger. The flush of royal favour was past. She was neglected and forgotten. Her splendid palace was indeed but a prison, and her lordly consort might prove her executioner. For a long time she had not seen the king or received the least token of royal favour or remembrance, and a new favourite might have succeeded her in the court of the capricious voluptuary. Yet she was sternly charged by Mordecai to rouse herself, meet the peril, and, if possible, save her people, while he taught her to recognise the designs of a wise Providence in her elevation. [257]

"Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" [258]

In the appeals of Mordecai to Esther, we may recognise the principles upon which he had trained her. The sense of duty, the obligations of religion, the call to self-sacrifice and exertion, had all been instilled while Esther was in private life, and they bear their fruit on the throne. Yet there must have been a conflict in the heart of Esther, before she could adopt the decision which might accelerate the doom of her people, while, if her appeal failed, her own fate was scaled with their's.

Surrounded by all the splendour of the court, with all the pleasures that pomp and power can command, with troops of menials treading marble halls, with the more genial luxuries of fair flowers and pure fountains and soft music—Esther felt the insufficiency of all that earth can yield in the hour of sorrow and trial. We may almost fancy that we see her, with lofty brow and pale cheek, her dark soft eye fixed in thought, and the compressed lip telling of the firm resolve. She [259]

has decided! She will venture the loss of royal favour, and life itself, to secure the safety of her people. "I WILL GO IN TO THE KING, AND IF I PERISH—I PERISH." Words more simple, yet sublime in their high meaning, have seldom been recorded. Strong purpose and high resolve call for but few words.

Yet Esther relied upon a power higher than that of Ahasuerus. She may have recalled the history of her nation; she may have remembered all the interpositions of Divine mercy in past extremities; and doubtless she relied upon those promises for the future which induced in Mordecai a confident hope of deliverance. She remembered that Jehovah—the God of Israel— [260] hears the prayers of the humble and the contrite. She appointed a solemn fast of three days, in which the Jews of Shushan should humble themselves and remember her before the God of their fathers.

A more eminent instance of simple dependence upon the Divine interposition, or of entire reliance upon the voice of prayer, has seldom if ever, occurred. There was no resort to outward ceremonies to awaken a deeper feeling, or to atone for the want of it by a formal observance. There was no altar, no sacrifice, no long procession, no promised offering, no resort to temple or priest, but there was the call upon God from the depth of the soul—the simple, unflinching trust of the heart, the personal humiliation, the individual prayer, the united offerings of supplication and confession from a whole people. There was the simple faith that relies on the Divine power and pleads the Divine promises with submission to the Divine will. It was a strange contrast to the sensual, gross, superstitious, and unholy rites of the heathen, while from its deep spiritual meaning, and from the entire absence of all merely formal observance, it was both a precedent and a model for future ages, and for the holy spiritual worshipper of other days. [261]

It was no heartless service, no formal act of worship rendered by the Jews of Shushan, when Esther called upon them to pray and to fast with her and for her. While the queen and her maidens fasted in the recesses of the palace, in many a lowly home or quiet chamber were gathered the race of Esther, to commit her and themselves to Jehovah, to beseech him to forgive the sins of his people and save them, for his mercy's sake, in this hour of their extremity. Mingled with their personal apprehension and anxiety for their wives and their children would be thoughts of "the daughter of their people"—their beautiful queen—so young, so fair, so lately exalted to the pinnacle of honour and glory; adorned with gems and wreathed with flowers, the pride of a monarch and the ornament of a court; now, neglected, abject, forsaken— [262] included in the doom of her race, prostrate in some secluded apartment of the palace—her royal apparel exchanged for sackcloth and ashes—still cleaving to the God of her fathers, and still identifying herself with her kindred and countrymen. Whether they regarded her royal state, her tender years, her bitter desolation, or her heroic resolution, all the sympathies of the heart, all the purest feelings of the nation, would be called forth in her behalf.

Other feelings would find a place in the hearts of the Jews as they contemplated their present state. The last deed of the Amalekite would bring to recollection the injuries of ages. This Haman, who now, in a time of profound peace and full security—while both races were exiles from the land of their fathers—had plotted the ruin of their nation, the total extermination of their race; who had doomed the feeble and helpless, the little one and the aged, to perish with the strong man in his might; this Haman was the son of those who fell upon the tribes, faint and weary, in the wilderness; who had pursued them with inveterate hatred; who had ever joined with their foes or stood ready to attack them in their defenceless state. [263]

When we recollect that the conspiracy of Haman but closed the long train of injuries inflicted on Israel by Amalek, we shall not so much wonder at the feelings sometimes expressed by the Jew. The character of the tribe was still the same—their course through all years was unaltered. And now, while Amalek has perished and the Jew survives, we can form no just estimate of that national feud. Haman was a type of his race—artful, cruel, treacherous, and bloody; and what the Roman was to Hannibal, what the ancient Persian was to Greece, what the Turk is to modern Greece, what Russia is to the Pole, such was the Amalekite to the Jew. [264]

While Esther had manifested her sense of dependence upon the eternal Ruler of nations, and her faith and reliance upon the God of her fathers, by humbling herself before him and relying upon his protection and interposition in this hour of darkness, she showed, too, a knowledge of the human heart, not often acquired at her age; an instinctive insight into the character and the motives of those around her, with the power of adapting herself to circumstances, that has seldom been displayed in one so young, combined with so many of the higher qualities of the woman. [265]

She knew the weak point in the character of Ahasuerus, and she forgot not the power of beauty, the influence of personal charms, as she arrayed her fair form in the rich and splendid vestments that so well became her, and summoned all the aid of oriental art and elegance to her toilette, that her presumption might be forgiven in her loveliness—that favour won by her beauty might be extended to her nation; and if she felt the hope of pleasing, as she surveyed herself in the polished metallic mirror, decked with the magnificence of a royal bride and adorned with the gifts of him whose favour she would seek, her heart might have sunk too at the remembrance of the favour she had once won and lost. In assuming the crown placed upon her brow by Ahasuerus, there was a tacit claim to her royal rights; for that gemmed circlet was not only a badge of rank, but a pledge of affection—a token of honour and royal favour, which elevated her above the throng of beauties who filled the courts of the palace. Had she arrayed herself in sackcloth, had she appeared as a mourner, an afflicted suppliant, she would probably have found [266]

the royal voluptuary more anxious to banish one who disturbed his pleasures, than to redress the grievances that appealed to his justice.

Yet it must have been with trembling limbs and a beating heart that she stood before Ahasuerus; and, by entering his presence unbidden, she made her mute appeal to his mercy.

And strange, at that unwonted place and hour, must have appeared the beautiful vision to the king, while courtiers and attendants stood in silent amazement. There was but one anxious moment before the sceptre was extended; the trembling queen touched it, and thus was encouraged to prefer her petition for any favour that the royal hand could bestow. The presence of Esther seems to have revived at once the fondness of the monarch, and all his coldness and indifference vanished like the mist before the rising sun. All the arts of Haman had been needed to wean him from her and to teach him to forget her. How rarely does a vile, unholy counsellor or companion seek to corrupt a private man, or a prince, or a ruler, without striving first to undermine the influence of the virtuous wife, mother, or sister! [267]

Warily does the royal suppliant present her request, still uncertain of the degree of favour on which she might rely. She offered no petition that could embarrass the king. She made no complaint of past neglects. She uttered no word of upbraiding for forgotten vows; but delicately implying that his presence was the source of her happiness, that this had constrained her to break through all the formal observances of courtly restraint and endanger life itself, she besought him to honour her by attending a banquet which she had prepared. Thus she avoided the awakening of the suspicions of Haman by even asking to see the monarch without his presence. Including him in her invitation, she allayed all jealousy of a wish to exert an influence inimical to his, while she thus offered an additional inducement to Ahasuerus to honour her feast. [268]

By a strong effort and great self-command, the young queen retained her calmness and preserved her grace and gayety. And even when the banquet had closed and the guests had retired, and the king again asked her to prefer her petition, she did not venture to prefer that which was nearest her heart. His favour was too uncertain and his favourite too powerful. She only besought his presence again as a guest, and again his favourite was included in the invitation. [269]

The Jews were still lying low before their God. When the feast in the palace was broken up, and the gates were shut, the high walls cast their shadows upon the moat. The sentinels still moved with measured tread. The lights gradually disappeared, except those that told of some one watching over the sick or dying, or some chance-beam betraying a late carousal. In the palace, the soft footfall of the attendants in the antechambers, could not disturb the slumbers of the monarch, while strains of sweetest music were ready to lull him to repose, as warder and sentinel kept watch over his safety. But still "that night the king could not sleep;" and wakeful, restless, solitary, he commanded his attendants to bring him the archives of his kingdom, and read to him the records of his reign. Strange request! How few monarchs would care thus to review the past, and force themselves to the judgment awaiting them from a higher tribunal and from future ages! [270]

It was not chance which held the eyes of the king waking. It was not chance which drew his attention to the conspiracy defeated by Mordecai, and to the investigation of the treatment he had received for so high a service. No reward, no honour had been conferred upon one who had saved the life of the sovereign. A strange forgetfulness or neglect of the prime minister of the realm! While Ahasuerus was devising some mode of requiting the obligation due to one who had rendered the state important service, he called for a counsellor, and was told that Haman was without, in the court.

Haman left the banquet of Esther in all the assurance of royal favour. He had attained to honours which distinguished him above all the subjects of the Persian empire. He had received distinctions which elevated him above even the princes and nobles of the kingdom; and in his pomp and power he passed, with his train of attendants, menials, flatterers, and followers, through the gates of the royal palace, "the observed of all observers;" and as he came into the thronged thoroughfare that led from the royal abode, all did him homage and showed him reverence—save one. [271]

Mordecai, the Jew, still sat at the king's gate—probably, still wrapped in sackcloth. His eye met that of Haman, but it quailed not. It was a stern, reproving glance! And while all others did lowliest obeisance, Mordecai neither bowed nor uncovered his head.

There was no word—there was no reproach—but there was a silent defiance, that conveyed to the soul of Haman an assurance of disgrace and defeat, and that told him he was despised, amid all his honours and prosperity. He hastened to his home. He gathered his household around him and told them of his riches, his honour, his prosperity, and the assurance his large family afforded him that his riches would descend in his own line, and that his ancient lineage and royal race should thus be perpetuated. He told them of the high honour that day received at the royal feast, and of a like honour in reserve for the morrow. But still his pride was mortified by Mordecai's course. "All this availeth me nothing," he said, "so long as I see Mordecai, the Jew, sitting at the king's gate." Wretched, malignant man! What a picture of the power and force of evil passions—of that selfishness which could find its happiness in the misery and suffering of others! [272]

His hatred of Mordecai seems the more insane, when we remember that Haman held his fate in his hands, or rather had actually sealed his doom. He might well forego forms of reverence from the man he had doomed to death. Yet the desire for the humiliation of Mordecai, for some token [273]

of abasement and fear, seems to have absorbed all other feelings; and as this was the only thing withheld, so it was the only thing desired. To soothe the disgust and allay the indignation of Haman, the family council decreed the immediate death of Mordecai, and they doomed him to the gallows—a most ignominious death. While this instrument of his destruction was in preparation upon the grounds of Haman, he sought Ahasuerus, that the sentence might be ratified. He who had given him the power to murder a nation, would surely assent to forestalling the doom of an individual; and Mordecai's disobedience to the royal order, his disrespect to the minister who represented the authority of the sovereign and the laws of the realm, seemed to offer a fitting pretext. [274]

While Haman was waiting in the antechamber for audience, Ahasuerus was resolving some mode of requiting Mordecai; and, ever prone to rely on favourites and counsellors, he was unable to decide for himself; so he sought advice from his favourite courtier, who was so near at hand. To him the question was submitted: "What shall be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" Ever selfish, ever intent upon his own promotion, and constantly loaded with marks of royal favour, Haman very naturally presumed that fresh honours were destined for him, and that he was to be allowed to designate the very marks of favour which he most desired.

"Now Haman thought in his heart, to whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?" And so he answered the king: "To the man whom the king delighteth to honour, let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the royal crown which is set upon his head. And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the streets of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour." [275]

If Haman intended this as a mere vain-glorious display—an impressive pageant, designed to publish to the people the high dignity of royal favour which he personally enjoyed—it would not be without meaning; but we cannot but think that, according to Eastern usage, there was a deeper significance in the ceremony.

The customs of the East are almost immutable, and there was much similarity between those of Egypt, Assyria and Persia. When Joseph was exalted to be ruler of Egypt, he was clothed in royal vestments, and passed in triumphant procession through the city, while all were called upon to bow the knee before him. Daniel was clothed in scarlet and in purple (the badges of royalty) while his honours were announced. But Joseph rode in the second chariot of Pharaoh, and his distance from royal state was clearly defined, while Daniel was declared third in the empire of the Medes and Persians. [276]

In appropriating all the badges of royalty—the crown, the robes, the horse, the princely attendance—Haman seems to have been preparing a claim to higher honour than those of Joseph or Daniel; to be even preparing to ascend the throne. All the homage that could be shown the subject had long been exacted. A nation was now under a dreadful doom because only one of their race withheld it; and now he would take to himself all the appendages of royal state! [277]

A sudden tumult in the palace, a popular outbreak, so common with despotic governments, might easily be accomplished, and Haman might ascend the throne of Ahasuerus—for the lines of descent seem to have been not unfrequently changed in the Persian empire; and in the convulsions of despotic states, even slaves have mounted the thrones of their masters.

Whether, in his designs, he merely sought the gratification of a present vain-glorious ambition or was preparing for a higher destiny, the revulsion must have been most overwhelming, the change and surprise inexpressible, when the announcement and command of the king fell upon his ear. [278]

"Make haste!" said he, "take the apparel, and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, who sitteth at the king's gate. Let nothing fail that thou hast spoken." You have devised the very highest honour that I can render: now confer it on the man I designate.

The Eastern despots are arbitrary; and Haman, confounded and petrified, ventured no remonstrance. He bowed and obeyed. He departed as the messenger of honour to Mordecai the Jew. Whatever the malignant and bitter feelings of his heart, he dared not give expression to them. He was compelled to serve the man he hated, to confer the highest honour on the man he had doomed to the deepest obloquy, publicly to bow before one whom he hoped to trample beneath his feet! With what contending feelings must he have delivered the mandate of the king to Mordecai! What strong emotion must have convulsed his soul! Yet the most powerful feelings are seldom displayed. The green sod covers the pent volcano, and a slight trembling alone denotes the action of the devouring element. It is all repose and calmness on the surface while the billows of flame are raging beneath. [279]

Thus the aspect of the courtier was calm, though sullen, while with his own hands he acted as chamberlain to the Jew and arrayed him in robes of royalty and honour. We may imagine a group for a painter, in Haman, dark, malignant, and sullen—and Mordecai, calm, proud, unbending, receiving service from his enemy. And after having with his own hands arrayed the new object of royal favour, Haman was placed at the head of the proud war-horse, as he slowly bore the Jew through the multitude, who thronged the street "to behold the man whom the king delighteth to honour." We seem to see him—the proudest, the most arrogant of men—with bowed head and averted eye, while Mordecai sits erect and firm, in all the dignity of conscious worth. [280]

As they slowly proceed through the thronged thoroughfare, obstructed by crowds who came to

gaze upon the pageant, many a significant sneer or half-uttered jest would convey to Haman a sense of his degradation in appearing as the groom of the despised Jew.

When the ceremonies were over, Mordecai again appeared at the gates of the palace. Nothing in the apparent condition of the two was changed, and the pageant may have seemed like a dream to Mordecai. He was only anxious to know the proceedings and fate of Esther. Yet he must have gathered hope for the future, as he still trusted and waited upon God. [281]

But a dark cloud had fallen upon Haman. He foreboded his doom. He was humbled, disappointed, degraded, disgraced. He had been paraded, before the multitudes, the menial of the Jew. He had been forced to confer on the man he hated the very honours his soul most coveted. "And Haman hastened to his house mourning and having his head covered." And he told his wife and the friends whom he had gathered to consult upon the fall of the Jew, all that had befallen him. And clear, far-sighted, daring, and unscrupulous, the wife who had counselled Mordecai's destruction, foretold to Haman his own doom. "If Mordecai be of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shall surely fall before him."

And they were probably counselling some measures for his personal safety; for when they were yet talking, came the king's chamberlain, and hastened to bring Haman to the feast Esther had prepared. [282]

As the feast proceeded, the king entreated Esther to ask some gift that he might bestow as a token of favour, or a pledge of affection. And then Esther, with a simple fervour, force, and dignity, and with the pathos of true feeling, offered her supplication for herself and her nation. "And Esther answered the king and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king! and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold—I and my people—to be destroyed, to be slain, to perish." She quotes the words of Haman's edict, and then adds, "But if we had been sold for bond-men and bond women, I had held my peace, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage," nor recompense the loss of so many of the king's useful citizens and peaceful subjects. Nothing could be more sweet, gentle, submissive, and truly dignified than her appeal. And the imagination and astonishment of the king are graphically displayed in his answer. Who is he? Where is he that hath presumed in his heart to do so? Who has dared to conspire against one so near my person, so exalted by my favour? [283]

Confounded, amazed—and probably for the first time suspecting the Jewish extraction of the queen—Haman was still speechless when Esther made her direct and firm reply: "That adversary, that wicked man, is Haman," here in the royal presence—here in the full blaze of royal favour.

In the conscious justice of her cause, she had desired to be confronted with the man she accused, and he was present, that he might enjoy every opportunity of defence, if innocent; and if guilty, that he might receive the just reward of his deeds. The king was filled with wrath at this proof of the presumption and malice of his favourite, and he left the banqueting-room and went into the palace-garden. [284]

Haman, quick to read the feelings of his master, "saw that wrath was determined." Unable to escape the watchful attendants, and moved by terror, he approached the royal couch of Esther to beseech her, whom he had greatly injured, to intercede for him. And while he was thus engaged, the king re-entered the banqueting-house. His wrath was rekindled. The imprudence of Haman hastened the doom his crimes had provoked. The excited monarch, witnessing his apparent familiarity, accused him of designs of which his previous presumption might show him capable. His sentence was pronounced—his doom was sealed. The attendants covered his face, (a most significant act, still retained in Eastern courts,) and he was carried from the royal presence-chamber, and hung upon the very gallows he had erected for Mordecai. The flowers which were gathered for the feast and the wreaths entwined for his brow were still fresh. [285]

The succeeding interview of Ahasuerus with his still loved and more than beautiful consort, must have been one of no slight interest. There was much to unfold and to explain; there was something to confess and to forgive; and as the character of Haman was now exposed and his acts were revealed, the king may have regarded himself as the bird escaped from the fowler. Esther revealed her lineage; while the rising favour of Haman, the dangers to be anticipated from his hatred to her nation, well justified the prudent caution of Mordecai. As the queen told the king in what relation Mordecai stood to her, Mordecai was brought before him; and the former honour proved but indeed the installation into the highest offices of trust, while the vast possessions of Haman were conferred on Esther, and Mordecai was appointed her steward. [286]

Yet, while the royal favour and protection was extended to these individuals, the edict was still in force against the race, and again Esther besought the king to interpose his power and protection. The laws of the Medes and Persians, however impolitic and unjust, could not be repealed. The king had no power over the statutes he had made. Like the deeds of life, once passed, they were unchangeable. He might regret the act, he might deprecate the influence thus put in operation, but he could neither recall nor cancel them; and one instance attempted might have destroyed the royal power.

Although Haman was removed, his family were numerous, and there was doubtless a large class of his ancient tribe who viewed him as the lineal descendant of their monarchs and entitled to their allegiance. They expected to share his triumphs, and, disappointed and exasperated, they would be ready to avenge his death. Haman being recognised as the highest officer of Ahasuerus [287]

and as his chief counsellor as well as favourite, he had great power and influence, and doubtless had a large party in his interests—either won by past favours or hope of future wealth and honour. At the same time all the discontented and turbulent of the land would be ready to join an outbreak which made the murder of any Jew lawful, where it could be accomplished, and which gave their possessions to those who were their destroyers.

All that Ahasuerus could do to avert the threatened extermination of the children of Israel, was to allow them to defend themselves if any dared to attack them. The whole empire was convulsed with the desperate struggle between the Jews and the faction of Haman; and while the royal authority aided the Jews in Shushan, so that they were entirely victorious, seventy-five thousand of their assailants perished in the provinces, where we are told the Jews gathered themselves together and stood for their lives; and it is recorded to their honour, that upon the spoil of their enemies they laid not their hands. And all this suffering and blood was the result of the policy of Haman. The Jews were not the aggressors, although they came off victors. [288]

It was the last conflict between the nations of Amalek and Israel, and threatening and prophecy were thus fulfilled while both nations were strangers and exiles from their own lands; and while the tribe of Amalek perished, the sons of Haman, who probably led the conflict in Shushan, were condemned to the same ignominious death which their father had suffered. We infer their actual guilt from the fact that they seem to be unmolested until the day appointed for the extermination of the Jews. As leaders of the tumult they deserved the doom they received. [289]

The lot is from the Lord; and the day of vengeance thus deferred from Haman's regard to the casting of the lot, gave the Jews full time to prepare themselves to resist their foes, and defend themselves after the issuing of the second edict, by which they were empowered to act on their own defence, and to repel openly by armed resistance.

The book of Esther is one of the most beautiful and variously instructive and interesting portions of the Old Testament. While it illustrates the providential care of Jehovah over all his people, and his readiness to hear their prayers and interpose for their deliverance, it shows too that he ruleth over all the nations of the earth, and that all the arts of intriguing men in courts and cabinets, the various changes which occur, either affecting nations or individuals, are all allowed to promote his infinite designs—all accomplishing his eternal plans. While his people, like Esther and Mordecai, gladly co-operate in the designs of the Almighty, his enemies are made the unwitting and unwilling instruments of advancing the same designs, and are accomplishing his purposes for the re-generation of a corrupt world—for the establishment of the kingdom of the redeemed, and the complete redemption of the children of God. [290]

As we look at the book of Esther, through the long dark vista of intervening ages, we are presented with a beautiful picture of a past period. Nations have perished and left no memories; and while all the other portion of our world, at that day, is shrouded in darkness or buried in forgetfulness, the light of revelation falls upon the court of Ahasuerus, and we see it in all the gorgeous splendour of oriental magnificence. [291]

The prosperous monarch of a powerful empire—munificent, prodigal, not deficient in capacity or heart, but indolent, and fond of luxury and feasting, he yields himself to the influence of the favourite; and when ready to rush into the seductions of pleasure, he still, at times, rouses himself and executes his own will, asserting his authority by some act of despotic power, of justice or cruelty, as the impulse prompts—he is a type of a large class of those to whom the destinies of more modern nations have been committed.

In Haman we see the courtier—crafty, proud, vain, ambitious, aspiring—intent upon personal aggrandizement, and the acquisition of wealth; gaining his influence over the mind of the monarch by ministering to his pleasures, and maintaining it by banishing all pure influences and crushing all nobler feelings. The history of Haman is replete, too, with instruction, in displaying the absorbing power of the selfish and malignant passions, and their fatal influence upon character and happiness. [292]

One unsatisfied desire will embitter all the most coveted possessions. There will ever be something to be achieved—some enemy to humble, some higher elevation to attain, some Mordecai in the gate, whose reverence withheld is more desirable than all the homage of the multitude bestowed.

He who cherishes in his heart a hatred of a class or an individual, is nursing a scorpion which will poison every kind feeling. We must love, not only to make others happy, but that we may be happy ourselves. We may withhold all marks of approbation from the unworthy, and still regard them with the benevolence required by the law of love. [293]

Thus while Mordecai saw in Haman the same persecuting spirit that had marked all his race; while he saw him, unholy, unprincipled, securing by his acts an influence over his master, which he abused; prostituting the royal authority to the ruin of the kingdom, making it subserve the purpose of his own unhallowed ambition; alienating the monarch from the queen, and inducing the disregard of the duties of private life as of sovereign power—Mordecai, as an upright, honourable, high-minded man, refused to render one, whose course he deprecated, whose character he abhorred, the honour accorded even by royal favour. He neither bowed nor did him reverence. But he did not assail him. He did not form any dark and treacherous plots against him. He did not revile him. All that he sought was to lead the blinded monarch to a calm investigation into the proceedings of his treacherous counsellor. And Haman had every opportunity of [294]

repelling accusation and justifying himself, as he was ever allowed to be present when Esther made her charges against him. There is a world-wide difference between the firm, indignant disapprobation with which a virtuous mind regards an evil man, working ill to all, and that malignant hatred which arises from selfishness and envy, and which pursues with bitterness and cruelty all that does not minister to its indulgence.

If it should seem strange to us that the national antipathy should so long be cherished, we may remember that it is quite as strange that national character should be thus faithfully transmitted through so many generations; and those who so confidently predict a change of character from the mere change of the circumstances of a people, may do well to ponder the facts presented by the past history of the races of the earth. [295]

There are other contrasts between the characters of Mordecai and Haman. Haman was superstitious, yet not religious. He was artful, selfish, treacherous, bloodthirsty, corrupt himself and corrupting others, ambitious and vain-glorious. Mordecai was pious, upright, conscientious; fulfilling every duty, yet seeking no selfish aggrandizement, no wealth, no personal honour—even when placed in circumstances where he might claim them as a just reward—and never exerting an influence for selfish purposes; still ready to forego and sacrifice all that was demanded at the call of duty.

While we see in Mordecai the devoted worshipper of the true God, the high-minded patriot, the man of inflexible integrity—an integrity that scorned the bad acts that would minister to the pride of false greatness—and a nobleness that rose above the desire for court favours, the strong features of his character are softened into beauty by his love for the orphan relative, his watchfulness over her childhood, and the interest displayed by his daily inquiries for her welfare. His affections were kind and tender, while his principles were unbending; and we feel that we love the man, though we are constrained to render a deeper homage to the patriot. [296]

Esther is one of the most beautiful characters in the gallery of Scripture portraits. Her character is peculiarly feminine; and while her path is marked by events of moment, it appeals to our hearts in each vicissitude of her lot. Youth and beauty always throw a charm around the possessor. Faint, perishing, transient as they are, they awaken all the sympathies of our nature; a deep compassion, a foreboding of the future; while the knowledge of the sorrows and trials which await those to whom the present is so bright, heightens our interest. Thus in each stage of the narrative, Esther comes to us with all that can awaken sympathy and excite interest. [297]

The fair flower is transplanted from Judea to the lands of the East—a scion of a stock soon removed—sheltered, watched, nourished by the pure dews of Divine truth; taken from seclusion and loneliness, where but one eye beheld its opening beauty, to the gardens of royalty; and there, among gayer and gaudier flowers, like the pure lily of the valley, winning royal favour by purity, sweetness, and graceful loveliness.

We follow her from her lonely home to the palace, and think how many fears and alarms mingled with the triumph of her beauty, the consciousness of her power, when an empire blessed her name and celebrated her beauty. And a deeper feeling is roused for the royal bride, lately so flattered, caressed, and honoured, now suddenly forgotten, neglected—left to the loneliness of her apartments or the companionship of her formal attendants, while her lord pursued his career of pleasure, apparently unmindful of her existence. [298]

A bitter lot it is to the young, to be loved and then forgotten. And sad the contrast to the royal Esther, between her late elevation and all the incense of homage and affection then offered, and her present desolation. Yet it was a season of needful humiliation. It awoke her from the dream of splendour and gayety, and brought her back to the sober realities of life and its stern duties; and it was also a season of preparation for the trials that awaited her. It brought her to seek a happiness higher than could be found in palaces or courts, a favour more desirable than that of an earthly monarch, a love that is unfailling, a faithfulness that should be enduring—and thus, when the day of trial came, she was prepared. She could cast herself upon the arm that never falters, she could seek the interposition of the God of her nation, and of each individual who trusteth in him and relieth upon his mercy. [299]

There was something beautiful in the blending of her conscious helplessness, her sense of loss of the favour of her royal lord and of the love and courtly honour she deserved, of her entire dependence upon the protection and interposition of Heaven, and her resolution to venture all for her people.

IF I PERISH—I PERISH! If we can recall the recollections of our childhood, we shall remember the breathless interest with which we attended her, in fancy, to the presence-chamber and awaited the extended sceptre. All the excitement of romance is concentrated in the story of Esther. And as we follow the narrative of her final triumph, her restoration to the love of her husband, the salvation of her people, and the exaltation of her family, we cannot but pursue the train of thought and feeling, and fondly hope that the influence of Esther and Mordecai might redeem Ahasuerus from the vices of youth, inspire him with higher motives, elevate him to a loftier standard, and rouse one, not deficient in natural kindness or nobleness of capacity, from a selfish voluptuary to an enlightened, able, and just ruler of a great people. [300]

The Jews still commemorate the feast of Purim, and celebrate their deliverance from Haman; and in all the climes and lands to which the race have been transported, they have carried the remembrance of the daughter of their people—the beautiful queen of ancient Persia, who

ventured her life to ransom her race.

We would learn from the whole history lessons of sobriety, of contentment with an humble lot, of the duty of cherishing the spirit of love, of kindness, of benevolence, of repressing the first germ of selfishness, of malignity, of envy; of dependence upon an over-ruling Providence; of encouragement to prayer, to trusting and waiting upon God. [301]

"Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer thee," is said to each contrite heart now, as truly as to Israel of old; and none who have thus truly sought the Lord in lowliness and penitence, ever sought him in vain. His care and protection are still around his people; and although the enemies of his church may try her, they shall never triumph over her.



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