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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OBIL, KEEPER OF CAMELS \*\*\*

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THE VERY GOD! THINK, ABIB; DOST THOU THINK? SO, THE ALL-GREAT, WERE THE ALL-LOVING TOO—SO, THROUGH THE THUNDER COMES A HUMAN VOICE SAYING: "O HEART I MADE, A HEART BEATS HERE! FACE, MY HANDS FASHIONED, SEE IT IN MYSELF! THOU HAST NO POWER NOR MAYST CONCEIVE OF MINE: BUT LOVE I GAVE THEE, WITH MYSELF TO LOVE, & THOU MUST LOVE ME WHO HAVE DIED FOR THEE!"

"AN EPISTLE"  
BY ROBERT BROWNING

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# OBIL KEEPER OF CAMELS

BEING THE PARABLE OF THE MAN WHOM THE DISCIPLES SAW CASTING OUT DEVILS

¶ AND JOHN ANSWERED & SAID, MASTER, WE SAW ONE CASTING OUT DEVILS IN THY NAME; AND WE FORBAD HIM, BECAUSE HE FOLLOWETH NOT WITH US. ¶ AND JESUS SAID UNTO HIM, FORBID HIM NOT: FOR HE THAT IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US.—LUKE IX: 49-50.

BY  
LUCIA CHASE BELL



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*How did it happen that this unknown man could work that tremendous miracle? How, when, where, did he get this amazing power? Was he some mere street necromancer, amiably conjuring*

with the Holy Name? Was this story which the disciples brought to Jesus only a bit of incidental roadside news to Him? Was His reply simply a gentle beam of that tender love which shines upon all those who may be, ever so dimly, ever so stumblingly, following His "far flag"? ✠ Often I have asked of this or that one, what he thought of this wonder-worker. ✠ Every one has seemed to think of him vaguely, indifferently, as a figure carelessly thrown upon the canvas "for what he is worth," or—in most minds—only to reveal the sweet, meek tolerance of Jesus. ✠ No wonder the disciples, who were themselves but just stumbling through the first lessons of infinite Love, could not understand. ✠ It came to me at last, that the reply of Jesus was really glowing with mighty inward joy, with the rapture of possession, of victory. ✠ The man casting out devils belonged to Him absolutely. No stranger, he, to the Christ. On the contrary, he had an intimate, secret, personal and blessed understanding with the Master. Somewhere, somehow, the World-Brother had looked into his soul, seized him, owned him, filled him with His own power, pity and love. He had entered into the divine joy, the divine Comradeship. ✠ He was working miracles of love because he must, not because he could.

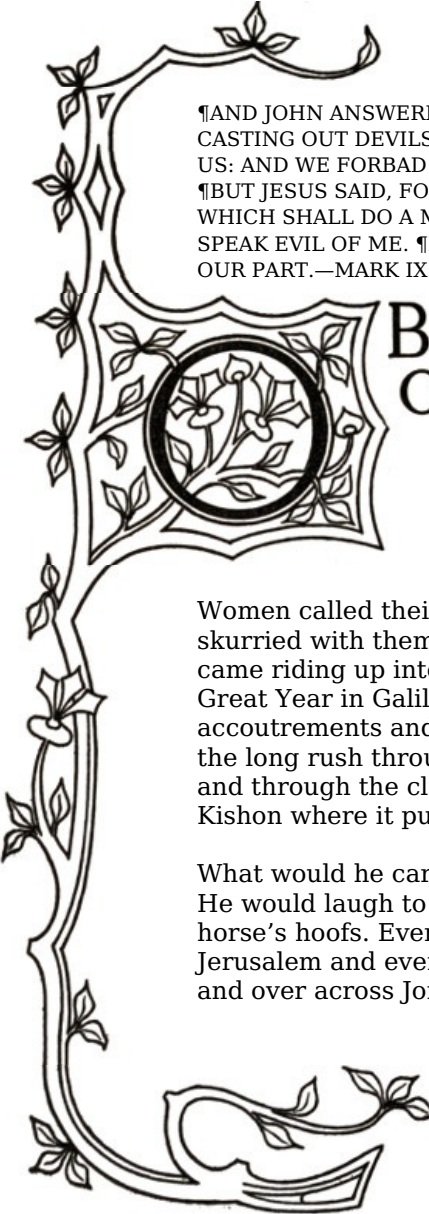
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## OBIL KEEPER OF CAMELS

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[2]



¶AND JOHN ANSWERED HIM, SAYING, MASTER, WE SAW ONE CASTING OUT DEVILS IN THY NAME, AND HE FOLLOWETH NOT US: AND WE FORBAD HIM, BECAUSE HE FOLLOWETH NOT US. ¶BUT JESUS SAID, FORBID HIM NOT: FOR THERE IS NO MAN WHICH SHALL DO A MIRACLE IN MY NAME, THAT CAN LIGHTLY SPEAK EVIL OF ME. ¶FOR HE THAT IS NOT AGAINST US IS ON OUR PART.—MARK IX: 38-40.

### OBIL · KEEPER OF CAMELS · ·

Women called their children to hide under mantles, or skurried with them to the shelter of dark huts, as Obil came riding up into Carmel on that day of the Lord's Great Year in Galilee; Obil, and three others, horses and accoutrements and their own bodies steaming yet from the long rush through salt surf down from Akka to Haifa and through the clean-smelling waters of the yellow Kishon where it puts into the sea.

What would he care—to ride a child down—that Obil? He would laugh to see it wildly flying from before his horse's hoofs. Every one knew this, from Ptolemais to Jerusalem and even beyond, down into the wilderness, and over across Jordan.

Some people said that Obil served the evil priests—which was far from the truth; others, that he was a tool of Herod, more silent than lightnings out of summer heat, and as sure to kill. It was, besides, insisted with whisperings and shudderings that he served only himself, and that somewhere deep among the awful crags by the Salt Sea a wondrous treasure sparkled, hidden by the red hand of the robber, Obil.

[3]

Yet there were some, away out in the hill country beyond Hebron, as you go toward Beersheba, who could tell of years when Obil had tilled a few fields there under the kindly sun and had kept cattle of his own on the gentle hills.

With his young wife Miriam he had paid tithes and kept the pleasant feasts. In not one humble home did the Sabbath candles ever burn brighter. No one's son had been brought up with more loving regard for the plain things of the law than the child of Obil and Miriam, from the very first. These things they knew in Hebron. But there was in Obil—here the heads came closer together under the mantles—in Obil there was a Strain of wild desert blood, strong in his race from the time of the first Obil, the Ishmaelite, Keeper of King David's Camels, and master of the great caravans that went from great Hebron down to far Havilah. [4]

Since he was a child, when his father took him on a chance journey far to the South, the desert-lust had come upon him year by year, driving him from his home till the lust was satisfied and he could return.

While he was gone, Miriam his wife, the soft-eyed, the meek one, tended the doves, the lambs, the goats and cattle.

Faithfully she taught their little son of the prophets, and of all the heroes of his race; of the great priest Simon; of Judas the Hammer, and his army.

When Obil came home, as the boy grew on, it came to be that he always took the boy on his knee, first breath, and asked for his tales of the heroes. And the boy loved to tell them as he stumbled after his father in the furrow, or lay with him in the cool evening under the vine at the door.

Every one marveled at this child as he recited long strings of the sayings of the sages, and prayers and psalms, and at the star-eyed reverence with which he would touch the name of the Most High on the little folded parchment that Miriam had placed on the lowly door-post of their home. Not only to his father but to every one the boy loved to tell his burning tales of the heroes and the prophets, until often it was whispered, "Perhaps God will raise up even this child, the son of Obil, to be liberator of Israel,—who can tell?" [5]

Perhaps, all unguessed by themselves, this hope was the reason that, to those who knew the little family of three, it seemed a strange and evil thing, certainly unblessed of God, that so suddenly and silently each year Obil should go away out of sight.

As for Obil, he had cared nothing for these secret whisperings. He never had struggled against the call of the desert in those old days, but had yielded in absolute joy.

Each year he knew that far to the South he would find old Abdul in the same spot in the wilderness bordering the desert, waiting at his tent door, the same horizon before him silhouetted with the same three palms (one lop-eared), the same remote, tawny line of low hills against the beryl sky, like some vast lion's long, lithe contour slipping through grass. [6]

His horse's harness would click dustily as it slipped down. Abdul would utter no word, Obil no word. There would be a fire of good coals and broiled meat ready—clean—such as was fit for a Son of the Law.

The big herd of camels would be there, and when Obil had eaten his meal the two would rise and walk with one accord out where the creatures lay, their drivers among them sound asleep, the beasts stirring with moans and complainings at sound of this half-familiar footfall. Then Abdul would open his mouth and speak, while Obil listened thirstily, of this camel and that; one here that was new, another old one there; this ugly one that was seized with the desert-lust every year, so evilly you could do nothing with her till the caravan started—and Obil affectionately patted her rough hide; of the various drivers, and the promise of trade, and bad shiftings in the route. Obil was head of the drivers in those days, and loved to sleep with them in the open air among the camels. It gave him deep content and oblivion for that time to all that lay beyond the horizon. He satisfied his hunger for the limitless skies at night, and soaked himself with unspeakable enjoyment in the passionate sun by day. No huge elemental turmoil of that wide life ever disturbed Obil. Sweeping fires of the wilderness, thunderings, earthquakes, winds, all gave him joy. Often he had wheeled his horse to chase the dry wild artichoke—the cursed Wheel, when caught in the wilderness flames it was turned into a ball of fire, and, lifted and tossed in the fierce wind, eagerly kindled new fires in its wild flight. [7]

Other men feared this fiery thing which maddened horses and camels and set vast tracts of wilderness on fire, but not Obil. It was true that he had listened with awe to the Chazzan reading from the Psalmist, in the little synagogue at home: "O my God, make them like a wheel, as the stubble before the wind. \* \* \* So persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm. Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek thy face, O Lord." For he remembered how he had seen that fierce Wheel suddenly snuffed out before the rushing winds, and he knew by this what must be the angry breath of Jehovah upon the wicked; still Obil feared nothing in those old days, neither the tempests of the desert nor the fires of the wilderness nor the avenging hand of God, for his heart was good then, his hands pure. [8]

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**I**N THE year when Barzillai, his son, was ten, Obil said to his wife Miriam, "Next year the boy shall go with me to the desert, that his shoulders may grow broad and his heart strong."

And Miriam bowed her head and answered, "As you will, Obil—next year."

But the child never went with him to the desert. For that year, while Obil was gone deep into the South silence, the long drouth swept out of the wilderness with such terrible heat as no one living had ever known. The fierce beasts came down from the mountains into the tilled fields and upon the herds. And the fiery Wheel came one day and lit Obil's field of grain and killed the cattle and the sheep that were left, and devoured his little vine-covered home. [9]

Miriam and the child escaped the fire, but she died soon, of a fever, or of the fright and shock—he never quite knew—and the Rabbi Elkanah, granduncle of Miriam, member of the Sanhedrin and a very great man, took the boy into his stately Palace of Palms standing in glowing gardens down near to Jericho.

"Come, Obil, be a man!" the rabbi said, standing like some great radiant iris in his full-bordered robes of pearl and blue, and laid a jeweled hand upon Obil's bowed shoulder.

"I will keep the boy. The blood of his mother's race is plain in him. It will be worth while. As for you, doubtless this is a curse, yea, and a curse also upon Miriam, your wife. 'As the bird by wandering, the swallow by flying, causeless the curse cannot come.' [10]

"You have not put difference between the clean and the unclean. You have not washed the wrist nor cleansed the cup before and after. On the Sabbath day you have lifted many times the weight of the fig. You have eaten things not cooked with intention for the Sabbath, and you have on the Sabbath dried your coat beside the fire. For these things the wrath of Jehovah is kindled against you."

"Doubtless it is a curse," said Obil humbly then. "But who of us common people can know the law? It may be that my son shall learn, if he attends with his whole heart."

"I will see that he attends," answered the rabbi with bitter haste.

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**O** BIL went to Tyre, for it seemed good to him to be in a new land among new men, beside the tumult of the busy sea, far from that lone blackened field in old Hebron, far from the paths of the desert.

Years went by and then he came riding home—just as he was coming up from the sea on this day of the Lord's Great Year in Galilee—only then his heart was good and his hands pure. And his heart sang to itself that first day as he rode alone through the surf, as he climbed the uplands and clattered along stony ways, "How tall my son must be grown, and how wise! No doubt he is marked even now in the streets—the splendid young nephew of the great rabbi. He will hardly be noted as Barzillai, the son of Obil. But no matter. Some day doubtless he will be a rabbi. It may be that he has even learned by this time what is the Greatest Commandment. This is something the common people seldom can know." [11]

He was sure that his son would welcome him with great joy. They would go out to the hill country together. He would have great things to tell his son, while his son would instruct him in the things of the law, the things one must know to be saved. The world shone wondrously that day. Secretly in the stormy rains the leaves had been glossing themselves, the long boughs of the plane trees had clothed themselves with mottled velvet in the blue darkness, the hillsides had gathered acres upon acres of rich purple iris bloom and glowing woof of tulips and anemones. All forms and colors stood out sharply in this clear sunlight; the backs of the red cattle in the sun, an old spear point glittering in the grass by the winding brook, and Hermon gleaming in his snows. [12]

Myriads of butterflies flecked the blossoming fields amid the wide humming of bees, and everywhere—everywhere—the larks sang, in silver unison with the joy of Obil.

That day faded into dusk before Obil came to the home of the Rabbi Elkanah in its wilderness of grove and garden.

In darkness came Obil to that well-remembered gateway. But what meant this?

No lantern gleamed here from rose-wreathed pillar. No sound of any lute floated out from perfumed bowers. Only a lone beggar started up from dank shadows. Obil's hand shivered as he dropped a gift into the beseeching palm and inquired of the rabbi and his house.

"Dost thou know?" came the quick, answering question, whispered with hot breath close in the ear of Obil. "Gone—gone! Some say dwelling in Jerusalem, some that he is gone to Capernaum. For he hates this house. Here died the lady Sarah, his wife. Here lived and died his son, the leper, hidden from the world." [13]

"And"—here the beggar's face again touched hotly the face of Obil—"didst thou know Obil, the Desert-lover, and Keeper of Camels for Abdul's Caravan? His wife Miriam was niece to the great rabbi. It was the son of Obil and Miriam they took with deceit and hid away deep, deep in the inner courts of the palace here, to be companion of their son, the leper.

"*Art thou Obil?* Go, go! Let them tell thee these things in Hebron! Let them tell thee how thy son, the slave, caught the poison at last, how they thrust him forth into the highways, blind, to beg with the leper herd! There they will tell thee how one black night he wandered over yonder broken aqueduct wall and fell to the stones below, to lie dead and forgotten,—a Thing not to be touched or known! Go!"

In Hebron they told him all, in much trembling and fear. This it was that changed the heart of Obil.

Serve a God who only lived to Curse, and whose honored servants were like this? Never Obil. He would curse Jehovah, kill, and die. [14]

But a strange spirit arose and grappled his soul within him. It said, "Wait! Kill now? Keep that for a joy to come. Nurse it, prize it, plan for it! Wait till he has reached the pinnacle of power and life is glorious and very precious to him! Strike now and lose the long joy of anticipation? Strike now and die? Do not be such a fool. Take your fill of life first. Have your will. Defy this Jehovah. Then kill, and die." And again Obil went his way. On stormy galleys of the great sea, into mines of Spain, far north to strange icy coasts, into the whirling wickedness of Antioch, carousing from city to city in Egypt, but never more to the desert! His hand came to have no mercy. A heap of dead faces might stare at him beside their own charred threshold, and Obil could stand, jocund, eating grapes from the piteous vine.

Often he had come back to look in secret upon the face he hated with supreme hate, wondering if he should strike now, and yet the strange hand of that mocking inner spirit held him back as at first. [15]

Those who in those swift visits had glimpses of the face of Obil did not forget.

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**A**ND now it was April once more; the same sky, the same scents in the air; Hermon gleaming in his snows just as he did that first day when Obil came riding up from the sea alone with the song in his heart.

Away in Damascus he had felt in his soul that the time was come. He had bought two wonderful blades of steel. One had power that would crush bones, the other was swift and sure and silent.

By crooked ways, that day of the Lord's Great Year in Galilee the four riders, after they left the sea, began trailing after one another among the sweet wild thickets of Carmel, brushing the dew from great flushing bowers of honeysuckle among the oaks, or skirting some little mossy dell where doves filled all the air with the mellow thunder of their blended calls.

The others laughed and sang, but not Obil. At other times in that strong swim through the wild waste of waters he had thought, "Thus will I come when I have had my fill and am to take the last and best of the feast. More glad will I come than the waters of this full stream rushing to the sea! With deeper content than yonder doves in the sun!" [16]

But today—how strange it was! The waters seemed dumb. They had no message for him. Yet he was to take the last and best. He was to strike, and say, "This for my son, whose life you took!" But the old huge joy did not rush upon him now. There was only a weight of dull will instead.

One of the three riding with Obil that day had secret letters from Spain to a nobleman in upper Cæsarea. Obil carried under his cuirass gold and gems sent from Rome by a slave to his master in Capernaum. Another had a debt of his own to pay, which he was coming home to settle hideously. He talked of it constantly, with boastings and glee. It was a woman. Thus and thus would he do—and then—would he never make an end of his story? [17]

Obil rode in silence. Had he "turned rabbi"? one asked. "Here, Fulvius!" laughed another, twisting himself on his horse to turn the youngest rider's face toward Obil. "Obil has taken up the doctrine of the new rabbi in Galilee. If I smite you on one cheek you shall turn to me the other. Try him!"

Fulvius tried, and was promptly knocked to the ground, his head cut on the stones, his wrist sprained. Laughing and swearing by their gods, and Fulvius raging, they set him on his horse and clattered on.

Obil stopped to pick up a little hurt jerboa. The strange creature, half bird, half mouse, had been nearly crushed, but it was alive. It seemed to look at him appealingly. Strangely, it made him think of a child he had picked up once and thrown into some dark pool to end its misery. (They had wiped out a whole clan that day, over in cruel Thracian forests.)

"Thou must die," said Obil, and gently laid the thing down, its eyes turned away from the blaring light. Then he drew his hand across his own eyes, mounted and rode on, thinking, "Those Steaming scents all around go to a man's head on a day like this." And over and over Obil said grimly in his own thoughts, "The hour has come!" [18]

All of the four had business in Capernaum, after which they were to go separate ways.

Obil went out to Cana and left his horse at a little vineyard that he knew, for reasons of his own. And walking on his way to Jerusalem he came to Magdala.

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**T**HAT day the Lord was in Magdala. All the wretchedness of the world seemed gathered there,—a vast, groaning, pleading, hideous, tumultuous sea of waiting, with one Face shining out of this darkness like a Star.

A Voice, infinitely sweet, told of the Kingdom of God, while the wondrous hands lifted and blessed and healed.

Obil stood on the farther edge of this sea at first, but the Voice reached him as it poured forth glad news of peace and freedom and love, and swept away the rags and tatters, the "old [19]

garments” of cruel doctrines of Scribe and Pharisee.

“Why, these things are not hard! Can a man please God with these things?” said the man Obil, and a great trembling fell upon him.

“Was it not a Curse, then?” he asked himself, going back to that day of dumb agony when he stood, bereaved, before the uncle of his dead Miriam. Something in the pure blue peace of the sky above that Face made him think of her and see her once more, as with holy joy she lit her Sabbath candles and chanted from the sacred song that she loved: “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the Soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.” He had despised the words and the spirit of that sacred song in those wild years that lay so close behind him, hated them, trampled on them, called them a lie.

But now—Miriam cursed for “lifting the weight of the fig” on the day that she loved? For moving a bench in her home, or drying his coat beside the fire? [20]

He pressed nearer, with a mighty hunger to hear of the real God, who loved and did not hate His world.

The maimed and the halt and the devil-possessed weltering there snarled at Obil, “Here, you lusty one! Get back! Nothing is the matter with you!”

For indeed his clear eyes were velvet and full of fire; his strong neck was like a column; his shoulders were massive as a good piece of gunwale timber out of Lebanon.

But Obil did not heed. A stern voice rose insistent in his soul: “Go, and delay not! The hour has come! Wilt thou avenge not the life of thy son?”

But with that horrible trembling upon him the man Obil stood. And the Lord bent his gaze upon Obil,—a gaze that was shorter than breath; yet it lifted his minutest past out from its veiling haze and pushed it before Obil’s agonized consciousness; all his failures, mistakes, misunderstandings, selfishness, blasphemies; all his cruelties and crimes, and the one long savage purpose to kill,—all arose, black, intolerable, before the flaming purity of the gaze of the Lord. [21]

If the earth could only open to receive him in safe darkness and oblivion!

But the earth did not answer his agony. Then the eyes of the World-Brother looked into his, deep, tender, glowing. “Come, follow Me! Hate no more, but love, and share My joy!” said that burning Look.

Back the soul of Obil answered, in unspeakable longing, out of that horrible trembling: “Thou who forgivest sins, canst thou forgive the black sins of Obil—even of Obil? So will I follow thee forever, blessed Son of God!”

Then quicker than comes the breath, the eyes of the Lord beamed upon him in immeasurable welcome, infinite forgiveness; and the man Obil knew that the compact was made, and the covenant was sure.

Strange pity and love for these hideous beings around him suddenly streamed into his soul. Were they not God’s children? The Blessed One had said it, and it must be true. [22]

A little shriveled child lay half crushed among the groaning heaps at his feet, waiting its turn. He looked down in that wondrous moment and knew that he loved this little wretched thing with naked, knotted, palsied limbs,—he, Obil! Tenderly he lifted it into his arms, and he laid it in the welcoming arms of the Lord. And again the eyes of Obil met the deep eyes of the World-Brother looking into his, as one should say, in full gladness, “Yea, now we are Comrades!”

Then turned away Obil in pity, to make room, and the cripples muttered, “It is good that he goes! What has the Master to do with him!”

He went forth, not knowing whither, but only that go where he would, he was always to be, every moment, within the circumference of that mighty Love.

As Obil walked he came to a village where the Lord had not yet come to heal, nor his disciples. It waited in tears and pain and seemed to be forgotten. The people were crowded in the narrow streets. Would he never come, the Miracle-Worker? [23]

The synagogue was deserted, the market, the fields. Here in an open space in the street, an awed multitude in safe perspective, heads clustered in upper windows or bending over balconies, Obil beheld one possessed of a devil.

Wild white hair all torn and bleeding, sinewy old arms with muscles and tendons torn and bared, body naked and gashed, tongue thick with hateful cursing, throat hoarse with horribly echoing shrieks!

“How they hate—those devils!” said a man just under Obil’s chin, to his neighbor in the crowd. “It is hard to know which kind is most evil, this one that shrieks, or the dumb—but all *hate*, mark you! When a man begins to hate with all his soul, then comes in the devil!”

“I have not a devil,” said this man’s neighbor, “yet I know for myself that what you say is true. When I am only mad against my wife Josepha I get dumb—I do not speak! So I know if I went far enough I would have a dumb devil, which God forbid! But know you this one?” [24]

“Why, *this*”—came the answer—“this is the great Rabbi Elkanah, he of the Palace of Palms, by Jericho. By Simon the Just, how he must have hated!”

Obil heard. Heard, too, the larks on the wide hills of Hebron, away back in the dim years; heard

the voice of his star-eyed son, fresh as theirs, talking of heroes!

A dread voice tolled in his soul and shut out all the world—the universe—with its vast resounding. “Kill! Now! Now is the time—the time!”

And out there in the hot, white space where the devil threw a black, writhing, horrible shadow on the ground, an answering shriek and wild, taunting laughter responded to that tolling bell in the soul of Obil.

“Obil! Thou hast come at last! Wouldst thou have thy son learn the Law, thou dog of Ishmael? Shall my son die and thine live, thou Accursed? Hear thou, hear, Obil, Son of the Desert! Why hast thou waited so long? Kill, kill, and die!” [25]

Then the stormy blood rushed hotly in Obil from head to heel. But he remembered the Look, the Covenant. His soul melted in an ocean of love. He ran into that naked space. His shadow braided itself with that horrible writhing one on the ground.

On the torn white hair he laid his hand. Around that old bleeding shoulder he threw his encircling arm.

“Thou devil!” called Obil then. “In the name of the Christ, the Son of God, I command thee, come forth!”

Then the man Elkanah sank to the ground, and he clasped the knees of Obil, murmuring low a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, till those strong arms lifted him to Obil’s heart once more.

“What is this?” broke in with sharp authority through the babbling murmur that arose.

“Who is this that dares heal in that Name?”

Muttering together, a group of the Lord’s disciples stood, surprised, displeased, bewildered.

But joy ineffable made glorious the face of Obil. He looked far beyond them, and he stretched out his arms toward Magdala, and loud he cried, [26]

“Jesus, thou blessed Son of God, the victory is thine—thine!” [27]

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