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Lew Wallace

in a new abridgment

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"Learn of the philosophers always to look for natural causes in extraordinary events; and when such natural causes are wanting, recur to God."

—COUNT DE GABALIS

DEDICATION:
To the wife of my youth who still abides with me

First Dell printing—July, 1959

Printed in U.S.A.

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"But this repetition of the old story is just the fairest charm of domestic discourse. If we can often repeat to ourselves sweet thoughts without *ennui,* why shall not another be suffered to waken them within us still oftener."

—JEAN PAUL F. RICHTER, *Hesperus*

"See how from far upon the eastern road
the star-led wisards haste with odours sweet

* * * * * *

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began,
The winds with wonder whist
Smoothly the waters kist,
Whispering new joys to the mild ocean—
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on
the charmed wave."

—MILTON, "The Hymn," from
On the Morning of Christ's Nativity

1

Is THERE ANOTHER bit of earth on the surface of this globe that has been so drenched with human blood as that little strip of Promised Land that links the great continents of Asia, Africa and Europe? Where, for a thousand years or more, Medianites and Moabites, Gibeonites and Ammonites, Philistines and Jebusites, Amalekites and Jews, massacred each other in never-ending wars for the possession of every fertile valley, every trickle of water, every rocky eminence, conquering, losing, and having to conquer again?

The very gods and goddesses of these tiny nations seemed as if locked in perpetual battle, and from the clouds above seemed to be forever bellowing for the smoke of more and more victims to be burnt on the altars of Ramman or Chemosh, Baalpeor or Hada, Nebo or Kadesh, Anath or Ishtar.

Not even the final winning of these myriad bloody engagements by the God of Mount Sinai could bring peace to this violent land. Jew split from Jew and fresh wars were started. Israel contended with Judah, Jerusalem with Gerizim, Chasidim with Hellenist, Sadducee with Pharisee, Hasmonean with Idumean. While from across the borders swept the armies of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, the Egyptians, the Romans, each in turn looting, killing, enslaving.

But for all that, never was there a land so blessed as this cursed land. For here amidst the milk and the

honey, the rocks and the desert, the blood and the tears, man first dreamed those greatest of all dreams: that a single deity should some day reign on high for all peoples everywhere; that a Messiah should come from God Himself to bring comfort and salvation for all mankind, both prince and slave; that a time should come when all men would be brothers and beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; and nation should no longer lift up sword against nation, neither learn war any more.

Such was the land in which our tale takes place, beginning one morning, late in the month of December, when in Italy men counted the 747th year since the founding of Rome, and in Greece they reckoned the second year of the 193rd Greek Olympiad, and in Palestine the Jews cursed it as the 35th year of the reign of the King Herod the Great, the same year that throughout the world later centuries would call the 4th before the Christian Era. On that late December morning a camel with a litter on its back issued from one of the rocky gorges of the Jebel es Zubleh range and headed westward across the lofty desert plateau in the direction of the city of Jerusalem, well over a hundred miles away.

Again and again the curtains of the litter would be pushed aside, and from the richly carpeted interior a dark gray-bearded face would emerge to gaze around with hawklike impatience, and then sigh with irritation and flick the curtains shut again. If there is anywhere in the world where patience must be studied and learned, it is on the back of a camel, for a camel is like the finger of God that can neither be stayed nor hurried. Even this fine dromedary, one of the purest of the renowned blond Syrian stock, had his own particular gait to which he had been broken since infancy, and which no amount of blows or caresses would now cause him to alter by so much as the fraction of an inch. The worst horse in the world, one already consigned for the knacker's boneyard, could easily outrace this camel if

given the spur, but by evening the triumphant ship of the desert would long have sailed past that nag's body over which the vultures would be swarming. And still the camel would be making his immutable five miles an hour, swinging and swaying along, swerving neither to the right nor to the left, a beast beyond caresses or curses, a beast that humbly submits while at the same time it proudly disdains.

Thus the impatient man in the litter was forced to subdue himself time and time again as he looked out on the same morning mist slowly shredding itself to pieces along stunted oaks and brambles. And then forced with increasing irritation to watch while the long noonday sun brought an ever brightening glare to the parched and crusted sand of an interminable plain almost devoid of vegetation and only broken here and there by some huge solitary boulder, until finally the late afternoon shadows began to lengthen along a sea of sand that was as if thrown up by a dry and dusty ocean surf against hummocks of clay and gray basaltic crags.

Mile after mile, and still Jerusalem lay far ahead. The litter swayed and rose and fell like a cork on water. Dried leaves in occasional hollows where the desert wind had sifted them, rustled underfoot. Sometimes a perfume, a spice trod out by the camel's hoofs, sweetened the air. Sometimes a lark, a chat or a rock-swallow leaped to the wing, or a terror-stricken family of white partridges ran whistling and clucking out of the way. More rarely, some fox or hyena shot off in a gallop from its disturbed nap, and then, at a safe distance, turned and, sitting on its haunches, studied these intruders, while panting for breath.

But to the impatient man in the litter all this was no compensating distraction. Far to the right could still be seen the hills of the Zubleh range, like a woman's veil carelessly tossed to the ground, rose-gray as yet, but gradually deepening toward purple as the sun went

lower. While over the highest peaks a vulture, a mere dot in the empty sky, sailed by on motionless wings.

Not until the camel gave utterance to a soft groan did the driver give up his futile hope of reaching Jerusalem that evening, and utter the immemorial desert signal for his mount to stop and kneel. "Eekh!" he cried. "Eekh and curse you!" Slowly the animal crumpled its forelegs, grunting softly. The driver extricated himself from his litter, put his yellow-sandaled foot upon the slender swan neck and stepped upon the already cooling sand.

At once the beast relaxed, quickly found its cud, and began to chew, closing its lustrous eyes.

The man, meanwhile, stamped his feet, rubbed his hands, tried to take the long ride's numbness out of his limbs. He was tall, powerfully built, dark as a Negro under the white and blue *kufiyeh* that was bound around his head with a silken rope. It was his hair, still blue-black in effect although already streaked with gray, that showed him to be a native of the northern stretch of the Nile, rather than the southern, for it hung straight and without the slightest curl. He was clothed from head to foot in a white cotton shirt, tight-sleeved, with rich red embroidery setting off the collars and the cuffs. Over his shoulders was a brown woolen cloak. His feet were clad in soft yellow sandals, gathered with a blue thong.

It was obvious that he was a man of both rank and wealth. Only to see the supplies that he began to pull from the boxes tied to either side of the camel and which thus formed the floor of his litter, proclaimed his affluence: in the first place a bundle of red and white striped cloth that quickly unfolded into a tent and for which cleverly jointed bamboo sticks soon made a center pole; and then a small rug of the finest wool and silk, whose colors shimmered in the evening sun; and finally a whole series of small baskets containing the best El Shelebi dates, strips of dried mutton, slices of hard cheese, flat dry breads and sweetmeats,

along with three or four rawhide gurglets of different kinds of wine and mead.

Then, having set his table on the desert sand before his tent, the Egyptian brought out a skin of water. He moistened a big sponge, but before bathing himself, he took care of his camel, clearing away the dust and the clotted sand from its eyes, from its nostrils and its lips. The camel took the whole procedure as nothing more than what was due it, continuing calmly with its cud—until its master attached to its neck a bag filled with dry vetch.

Only when the camel had turned to its food did the man sit down to his, but even then he paused for one more look around. There, to the west, must lie Jerusalem, but as yet not a sign of it. Indeed the whole countryside seemed empty, and except for a distant jackal fleeing across the plain and an osprey winging toward the Gulf of Akaba, the world, above and below, might have been taken for a lifeless waste.

No! To the north appearing over a sand-dune came a horseman, riding fast. Though the rule of the desert is that the lone stranger is always your friend, the Egyptian reached for his knife, a thin curved blade, but only to make sure that it was available if needed.

In a moment the horseman had drawn up some hundred feet away, where he halted, as if to prove that his intentions were peaceful and to show clearly that he himself was unarmed. He was a man of about fifty, with fair, curly hair and beard, blue-eyed, sun-tanned, handsome. Beneath his Tyrian blanket, he wore the usual Greek chlamys, a short-sleeved tunic, low-necked, gathered at the waist by a belt, leaving neck, arms and legs bare, except for the openwork sandals on his feet.

"Hail!" he said, dismounting and approaching. "I've lost my way to Jerusalem. And now I need water for my mount."

"There's no water here," said the Egyptian in the same Greek language that had become universal in the Mediterranean world since Alexander had conquered

it. "Except for the water I carry here, and to which you are welcome. My camel can do without. And tomorrow we shall certainly reach Jerusalem."

While the Greek was watering his horse the Egyptian invited him to share a meal with him, and spend the night in the shelter of his tent.

"I'm very anxious to be in Jerusalem as soon as possible," said the Greek. "But I don't think this horse can go much farther tonight. I am therefore grateful to you for your kindness."

But as the two men were about to make themselves comfortable on the carpet where the food was spread, and where the Egyptian had just offered his guest a damp napkin to wipe his face, hands and feet, they both became aware of a figure approaching from the east: a man on foot, supporting himself with a staff, and exerting himself to the longest possible strides. He was tall and gaunt, and so aged that his wisp of a white beard floated in the wind like a spider's silk. In his weathered face that was like some brown bark, lay two deeply sunken eyes peering out from beneath eyebrows that were like a heavy silver thatch. His head was covered with a peaked yellow turban. Over his shoulders hung a white woolen cloak embroidered with gold thread.

As he came abreast of the other two who had risen to greet him, the lean man bowed slightly, but made no sign of stopping. "Peace," he said curtly. "Have I far to Jerusalem?"

"You'll never reach it tonight," said the Egyptian. "Stop here with us. We too are bound for Jerusalem."

"No thank you. I may be late already," said the tall man. "My servant ran off with my camels, so I must make the last miles on foot."

"Then ride with me tomorrow. In my litter," said the Egyptian, while the old man, obviously exhausted, paused and considered. "At least refresh yourself," the Egyptian went on, proffering him one of the dampened cloths. "We are also anxious to get to the city of the

Jews, but we are reconciled to the fact that it is beyond human possibility to make it tonight."

"So be it," said the tall man with a sigh. "I thank you, friends, for this invitation."

As they all sat down together and the Egyptian pushed forward his baskets of dates, figs, cheese, mutton and so forth, he said, "May I present myself? And hope that you will likewise introduce yourselves? My name is Balthazar, and as you see I am an Egyptian."

"Call me Melchior," said the ancient who had come on foot. "But please do not conclude from my dress that I am one of those ignorant stargazers who all over the world put on this style of dress and call themselves Chaldeans so as to impress the gullible in the belief that they have the gift of telling your fortune from the positions of the stars at your birth."

"My name," said the horseman, "is Gaspar, and I'm a member of the Cleanthes family of Athens." He turned with a smile to Melchior, the Chaldean. "I'm relieved to hear you say that you are not an astrologer."

"Why so?" Melchior asked.

"Because it is the most detestable of all the vulgar superstitions of man."

"I'm afraid then that I've misled you. I do indeed believe in that vulgar superstition."

"What? You really have faith in astrology? And perhaps you even practice it?"

"I do."

"Then how, sir, do you explain the question that Cicero asks: after a battle the dead will be found to come from every possible birthday of the year. If the stars, by their positions at our birth, rule our days, then those born on the same day should have the same fate, and those born on different days should have different fates. And the dead after a battle should prove it."

"I asked you only not to confuse me with those ignorant stargazers who pretend to know everything that is written in the sky," said Melchior. "But use your eyes! Already it is dark enough so that the stars are

beginning to reveal themselves in all their glory. Where else can you behold such poetry?"

"Yes, it is poetry," said Melchior, "the poetry of the universe. But does that mean that the stars have anything to do with the fate of man?"

"How can you deny it?" Melchior exclaimed. "For whom are the stars intended? What other creature on the face of the earth looks up at them? For whom is all this poetry written if not for man? The dog bays at the full moon, yes, that is true, and some say the eagle looks straight into the sun. But of all the creatures that walk or fly or swim, only man looks up at that starry sky: looks up and wonders. Find me a man, anywhere on this earth, who is not impelled to gaze up there and ask himself: what does all that mean?—Oh my friends, perhaps I speak only for myself when I say: all my life I have considered them and studied them. But perhaps that is because I am Chaldean and come from a land without clouds, where the air is so clear that the stars are always brighter there than anywhere else."

The other two men, impressed by the fervor in the Chaldean's voice, could not take their eyes from the constellations.

"Yes, perhaps it is only because I am a Chaldean, and it is my ancestors who first noted the wanderings of the seven planets amidst the wheel of the constellations. It is we Chaldeans who first divided the phases of the moon, giving seven days to each phase, and thus inventing the week. We first plotted the course of the sun through the Zodiac of the stars, dividing the heavenly journey of the sun into twelve houses of thirty days each, and thus inventing the month and the year. It is we who first declared that in this world all things can be measured, weighed or timed, and that therefore the essence of all creation is number. Oh yes, the stars, there is all our genius, and all our destiny. If only man could read what it says up there!"

"Then you do admit that man cannot read the stars?" Gaspar cried.