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THE WIFE OF MY YOUTH

WHO

STILL ABIDES WITH ME

"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 ennul, why shall not another be suffered to awaken them within us still oftener."—Hesp.: Jean Paul F. Riohter.

** 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.*

Christ's Nativity: The Hymn.—MILTON.**

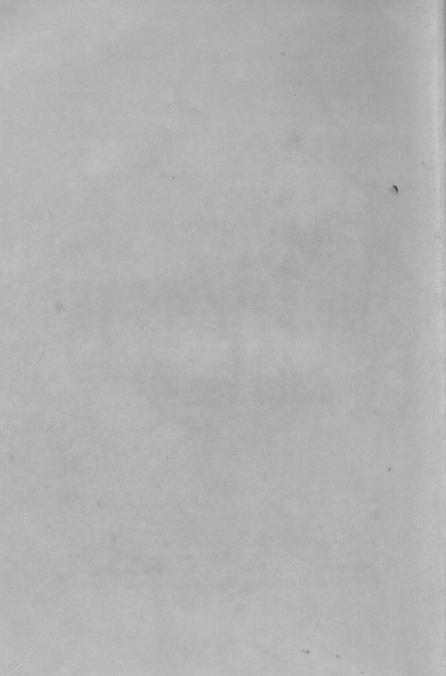
TABLE OF CONTENTS.

BOOK FIRST.	PAGE
CHAPTER	9
	13
II. MEETING OF THE WISE MEN	18
III. THE ATHENIAN SPEAKS—FAITH	21
IV. Speech of the Hindoo-Love	26
V. THE EGYPTIAN'S STORY—GOOD WORKS	34
VI. THE JOPPA GATE	-
VII. TYPICAL CHARACTERS AT THE JOPPA GATE	38
VIII JOSEPH AND MARY GOING TO BETHLEHEM	43
IX THE CAVE AT BETHLEHEM	48
X. THE LIGHT IN THE SKY	57
XI. CHRIST IS BORN	58
XII. THE WISE MEN ARRIVE AT JERUSALEM	65
XIII. THE WITNESSES BEFORE HEROD	68
XIV. THE WISE MEN FIND THE CHILD	78
BOOK SECOND.	
I. JERUSALEM UNDER THE ROMANS	. 81
II. BEN-HUR AND MESSALA	84
III. A JUDEAN HOME	. 94
IV. THE STRANGE THINGS BEN-HUR WANTS TO KNOW	100
V. Rome and Israel—A Comparison	. 107
V. ROME AND ISRAEL—A COMPARISON	114
VI. THE ACCIDENT TO GRATUS	
TIT A CATTER STAVE	

CHAPTER	BOOK THIRD.	PAGE
	QUINTUS ARRIUS GOES TO SEA	
	AT THE OAR	
	ARRIUS AND BEN-HUR ON DECK	
	"No. 60" ,	
	THE SEA FIGHT	
	ARRIUS ADOPTS BEN-HUR	
	BOOK FOURTH.	
I.	BEN-HUR RETURNS EAST	
	On the Orontes	
		179
IV.	SIMONIDES AND ESTHER	189
V.		197
VI.	THE MULBERRIES OF DAPHNE	203
		209
VIII.	THE FOUNTAIN OF CASTALIA	215
	THE CHARIOT RACE DISCUSSED	
		228
	THE WISE SERVANT AND HIS DAUGHTER	
XII.		245
	A Driver for Ilderim's Arabs	
	THE DOWAR IN THE ORCHARD OF PALMS	
	Balthasar Impresses Ben-Hur	
		274
XVII.	THE KINGDOM—Spiritual or Political?	281
	BOOK FIFTH.	
I.	Messala Doffs his Chaplet	288
	ILDERIM'S ARABS UNDER THE YOKE	
	THE ARTS OF CLEOPATRA	
IV.	Messala on Guard	310
v.		311
	TRAINING THE FOUR	318
		322

TABLE OF CONTENTS.	vii
THE SPIRITUAL OR POLITICAL?—SIMONIDES ARGUES IX. ESTHER AND BEN-HUR X. POSTED FOR THE RACE XI. MAKING THE WAGERS III. THE CIRCUS IV. THE RACE VV. THE RACE	. 343 348 . 355 360 . 368
BOOK SIXTH.	
I. THE TOWER OF ANTONIA—CELL NO. VI	. 398 . 410 . 415 . 422
BOOK SEVENTH.	
I. JERUSALEM GOES OUT TO A PROPHET. II. NOONING BY THE POOL—IRAS. III. THE LIFE OF A SOUL. IV. BEN-HUR KEEPS WATCH WITH IRAS. V. AT BETHABARA.	. 450
BOOK EIGHTH.	
IV. THE MIRACLE. V. PILGRIMS TO THE PASSOVER. VI. A SERPENT OF THE NILE. VII. BEN-HUR RETURNS TO ESTHER VIII. GETHSEMANE—"WHOM SEEK YE?"	490 . 499 507 . 510 522 525
IA. THE GOING TO CALLED	. 941

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BEN-HUR: A TALE OF THE CHRIST.

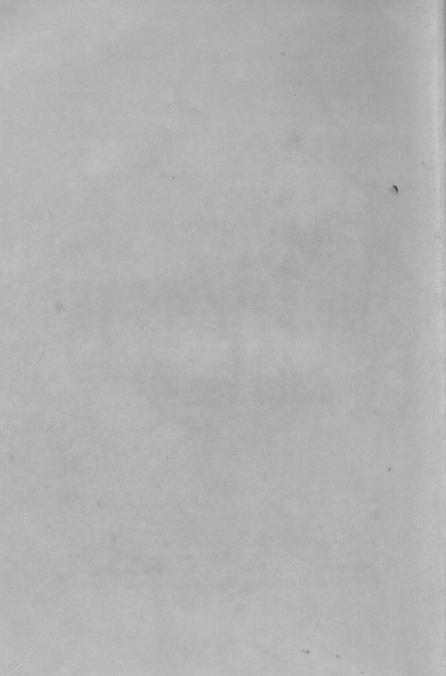
BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

The Jebel es Zubleh is a mountain fifty miles and more in length, and so narrow that its tracery on the map gives it a likeness to a caterpillar crawling from the south to the north. Standing on its red-and-white cliffs, and looking off under the path of the rising sun, one sees only the Desert of Arabia, where the east winds, so hateful to the vine-growers of Jericho, have kept their playgrounds since the beginning. Its feet are well covered by sands tossed from the Euphrates, there to lie; for the mountain is a wall to the pasture-lands of Moab and Ammon on the west—lands

which else had been of the desert a part.

The Arab has impressed his language upon everything south and east of Judea; so, in his tongue, the old Jebel is the parent of numberless wadies which, intersecting the Roman road—now a dim suggestion of what once it was, a dusty path for Syrian pilgrims to and from Mecca—run their furrows, deepening as they go, to pass the torrents of the rainy season into the Jordan, or their last receptacle, the Dead Sea. Out of one of these wadies—or, more particularly, out of that one which rises at the extreme end of the Jebel, and, extending east of north, becomes at length the bed of the Jabbok River—a traveller passed, going to the table-lands of the desert. To this person the attention of the reader is first besought.



原书缺页

Judged by his appearance, he was quite forty-five years old. His beard, once of the deepest black, flowing broadly over his breast, was streaked with white. His face was brown as a parched coffee-berry, and so hidden by a red kufiyeh (as the kerchief of the head is at this day called by the children of the desert) as to be but in part visible. Now and then he raised his eyes, and they were large and dark. He was clad in the flowing garments so universal in the East; but their style may not be described more particularly, for he sat under a miniature tent, and rode a

great white dromedary.

It may be doubted if the people of the West ever overcome the impression made upon them by the first view of a camel equipped and loaded for the desert. Custom, so fatal to other novelties, affects this feeling but little. At the end of long journeys with caravans, after years of residence with the Bedawin, the Western-born, wherever they may be, will stop and wait the passing of the stately brute. The charm is not in the figure, which not even love can make beautiful; nor in the movement, the noiseless stepping, or the broad careen. As is the kindness of the sea to a ship. so is that of the desert to its creature. It clothes him with all its mysteries; in such manner, too, that while we are looking at him we are thinking of them: therein is the wonder. The animal which now came out of the wady might well have claimed the customary homage. Its color and height; its breadth of foot; its bulk of body, not fat, but overlaid with muscle; its long, slender neck, of swanlike curvature; the head, wide between the eyes, and tapering to a muzzle which a lady's bracelet might have almost clasped; its motion, step long and elastic, tread sure and soundless-all certified its Syrian blood, old as the days of Cyrus, and absolutely priceless. There was the usual bridle. covering the forehead with scarlet fringe, and garnishing the throat with pendent brazen chains, each ending with a tinkling silver bell; but to the bridle there was neither rein for the rider nor strap for a driver. The furniture perched on the back was an invention which with any other people than of the East would have made the inventor renowned. It consisted of two wooden boxes, scarce four feet in length, balanced so that one hung at each side; the inner space, softly lined and carpeted, was arranged to allow the master to sit or lie half reclined; over it all was stretched a green awning. Broad back and breast straps, and girths, secured with countless knots and ties, held the device in place. In such manner the ingenious sons of Cush had contrived to make comfortable the sunburnt ways of the wilderness, along which lay their duty as often as their pleasure.

When the dromedary lifted itself out of the last break of the wady, the traveller had passed the boundary of El Belka, the ancient Ammon. It was morning-time. Before him was the sun, half curtained in fleecy mist; before him also spread the desert; not the realm of drifting sands, which was farther on, but the region where the herbage began to dwarf; where the surface is strewn with boulders of granite, and gray and brown stones, interspersed with languishing acacias and tufts of camel-grass. The oak, bramble, and arbutus lay behind, as if they had come to a line, looked over into the well-less waste, and crouched with fear.

And now there was an end of path or road. More than ever the camel seemed insensibly driven; it lengthened and quickened its pace, its head pointed straight towards the horizon; through the wide nostrils it drank the wind in great draughts. The litter swayed, and rose and fell like a boat in the waves. Dried leaves in occasional beds rustled underfoot. Sometimes a perfume like absinthe sweetened all the air. Lark and chat and rock-swallow leaped to wing, and white partridges ran whistling and clucking out of the way. More rarely a fox or a hyena quickened his gallop, to study the intruders at a safe distance. Off to the right rose the hills of the Jebel, the pearl-gray veil resting upon them changing momentarily into a purple which the sun would make matchless a little later. Over their highest peaks a vulture sailed on broad wings into widening circles. But of all these things the tenant under the green tent saw nothing, or, at least, made no sign of recognition. His eyes were fixed and dreamy. The going of the man, like that of the animal, was as one being led.

For two hours the dromedary swung forward, keeping

the trot steadily and the line due east. In that time the traveller never changed his position, nor looked to the right or left. On the desert, distance is not measured by miles or leagues, but by the saat, or hour, and the manzil, or halt: three and a half leagues fill the former, fifteen or twentyfive the latter; but they are the rates for the common camel. A carrier of the genuine Syrian stock can make three leagues easily. At full speed he overtakes the ordinary winds. As one of the results of the rapid advance, the face of the landscape underwent a change. The Jebel stretched along the western horizon, like a pale-blue ribbon. A tell, or hummock of clay and cemented sand, arose here and there. Now and then basaltic stones lifted their round crowns, outposts of the mountain against the forces of the plain; all else, however, was sand, sometimes smooth as the beaten beach, then heaped in rolling ridges; here chopped waves, there long swells. So, too, the condition of the atmosphere changed. The sun, high risen, had drunk his fill of dew and mist, and warmed the breeze that kissed the wanderer under the awning; far and near he was tinting the earth with faint milk-whiteness, and shimmering all the sky.

Two hours more passed without rest or deviation from the course. Vegetation entirely ceased. The sand, so crusted on the surface that it broke into rattling flakes at every step, held undisputed sway. The Jebel was out of view, and there was no landmark visible. The shadow that before followed had now shifted to the north, and was keeping even race with the objects which cast it; and as there was no sign of halting, the conduct of the traveller

became each moment more strange.

No one, be it remembered, seeks the desert for a pleasure-ground. Life and business traverse it by paths along which the bones of things dead are strewn as so many blazons. Such are the roads from well to well, from pasture to pasture. The heart of the most veteran sheik beats quicker when he finds himself alone in the pathless tracts. So the man with whom we are dealing could not have been in search of pleasure; neither was his manner that of a fugitive; not once did he look behind him. In such situ-

ations fear and curiosity are the most common sensations; he was not moved by them. When men are lonely, they stoop to any companionship; the dog becomes a comrade, the horse a friend, and it is no shame to shower them with caresses and speeches of love. The camel received

no such token, not a touch, not a word.

Exactly at noon the dromedary, of its own will, stopped, and uttered the cry or moan, peculiarly piteous, by which its kind always protest against an overload, and sometimes crave attention and rest. The master thereupon bestirred himself, waking, as it were, from sleep. He threw the curtains of the houdah up, looked at the sun, surveyed the country on every side long and carefully, as if to identify an appointed place. Satisfied with the inspection, he drew a deep breath and nodded, much as to say, "At last, at last!" A moment after, he crossed his hands upon his breast, bowed his head, and prayed silently. The pious duty done, he prepared to dismount. From his throat proceeded the sound heard doubtless by the favorite camels of Job—Ikh! ikh!—the signal to kneel. Slowly the animal obeyed, grunting the while. The rider then put his foot upon the slender neck, and stepped upon the sand.

CHAPTER II.

The man as now revealed was of admirable proportions, not so tall as powerful. Loosening the silken rope which held the kufiyeh on his head, he brushed the fringed folds back until his face was bare—a strong face, almost negro in color; yet the low, broad forehead, aquiline nose, the outer corners of the eyes turned slightly upward, the hair profuse, straight, harsh, of metallic lustre, and falling to the shoulder in many plaits, were signs of origin impossible to disguise. So looked the Pharaohs and the later Ptolemies; so looked Mizraim, father of the Egyptian race. He wore the kamis, a white cotton shirt, tight-sleeved, open in front, extending to the ankles and embroidered down the collar and breast, over which was thrown a brown woollen cloak, now, as in all probability it was

then, called the aba, an outer garment with long skirt and short sleeves, lined inside with stuff of mixed cotton and silk, edged all round with a margin of clouded yellow. His feet were protected by sandals, attached by thongs of soft leather. A sash held the kamis to his waist. What was very noticeable, considering he was alone, and that the desert was the haunt of leopards and lions, and men quite as wild, he carried no arms, not even the crooked stick used for guiding camels; wherefore we may at least infer his errand peaceful, and that he was either uncom-

monly bold or under extraordinary protection.

The traveller's limbs were numb, for the ride had been long and wearisome; so he rubbed his hands and stamped his feet, and walked round the faithful servant, whose lustrous eyes were closing in calm content with the cud he had already found. Often, while making the circuit, he paused, and, shading his eyes with his hands, examined the desert to the extremest verge of vision; and always, when the survey was ended, his face clouded with disappointment, slight, but enough to advise a shrewd spectator that he was there expecting company, if not by appointment; at the same time, the spectator would have been conscious of a sharpening of the curiosity to learn what the business could be that required transaction in a place so far from civilized abode.

However disappointed, there could be little doubt of the stranger's confidence in the coming of the expected company. In token thereof, he went first to the litter, and, from the cot or box opposite the one he had occupied in coming, produced a sponge and a small gurglet of water, with which he washed the eyes, face, and nostrils of the camel; that done, from the same depository he drew a circular cloth, red-and-white-striped, a bundle of rods, and a stout cane. The latter, after some manipulation, proved to be a cunning device of lesser joints, one within another, which, when united together, formed a centre pole higher than his head. When the pole was planted, and the rods set around it, he spread the cloth over them, and was literally at home—a home much smaller than the habitations of emir and sheik, yet their counterpart in all other re-

spects. From the litter again he brought a carpet or square rug, and covered the floor of the tent on the side from the sun. That done, he went out, and once more, and with greater care and more eager eyes, swept the encircling country. Except a distant jackal, galloping across the plain, and an eagle flying towards the Gulf of Akaba, the waste below, like the blue above it, was lifeless.

He turned to the camel, saying low, and in a tongue strange to the desert, "We are far from home, O racer with the swiftest winds—we are far from home, but God is

with us. Let us be patient."

Then he took some beans from a pocket in the saddle, and put them in a bag made to hang below the animal's nose; and when he saw the relish with which the good servant took to the food, he turned and again scanned the world of sand, dim with the glow of the vertical sun.

"They will come," he said, calmly. "He that led me is

leading them. I will make ready."

From the pouches which lined the interior of the cot, and from a willow basket which was part of its furniture, he brought forth materials for a meal: platters close-woven of the fibres of palms; wine in small gurglets of skin; mutton dried and smoked; stoneless shami, or Syrian pomegranates; dates of El Shelebi, wondrous rich and grown in the nakhil, or palm orchards, of Central Arabia; cheese, like David's "slices of milk;" and leavened bread from the city bakery—all which he carried and set upon the carpet under the tent. As the final preparation, about the provisions he laid three pieces of silk cloth, used among refined people of the East to cover the knees of guests while at table—a circumstance significant of the number of persons who were to partake of his entertainment—the number he was awaiting.

All was now ready. He stepped out: lo! in the east a dark speck on the face of the desert. He stood as if rooted to the ground; his eyes dilated; his flesh crept chilly, as if touched by something supernatural. The speck grew; became large as a hand; at length assumed defined proportions. A little later, full into view swung a duplication of his own dromedary, tall and white, and bearing a houdah,

the travelling litter of Hindostan. Then the Egyptian crossed his hands upon his breast, and looked to heaven.

"God only is great!" he exclaimed, his eyes full of tears,

his soul in awe.

The stranger drew nigh—at last stopped. Then he, too, seemed just waking. He beheld the kneeling camel, the tent, and the man standing prayerfully at the door. He crossed his hands, bent his head, and prayed silently; after which, in a little while, he stepped from his camel's neck to the sand, and advanced towards the Egyptian, as did the Egyptian towards him. A moment they looked at each other; then they embraced—that is, each threw his right arm over the other's shoulder, and the left round the side, placing his chin first upon the left, then upon the right breast.

"Peace be with thee, O servant of the true God!" the stranger said.

"And to thee, O brother of the true faith!—to thee peace and welcome," the Egyptian replied, with fervor.

The new-comer was tall and gaunt, with lean face, sunken eyes, white hair and beard, and a complexion between the hue of cinnamon and bronze. He, too, was unarmed. His costume was Hindostani; over the skull-cap a shawl was wound in great folds, forming a turban; his body garments were in the style of the Egyptian's, except that the aba was shorter, exposing wide flowing breeches gathered at the ankles. In place of sandals, his feet were clad in half-slippers of red leather, pointed at the toes. Save the slippers, the costume from head to foot was of white linen. The air of the man was high, stately, severe. Visvamitra, the greatest of the ascetic heroes of the Iliad of the East, had in him a perfect representative. He might have been called a Life drenched with the wisdom of Brahma-Devotion Incarnate. Only in his eyes was there proof of humanity; when he lifted his face from the Egyptian's heast, they were glistening with tears.

"God only is great!" he exclaimed, when the embrace

was finished.

"And blessed are they that serve him!" the Egyptian answered, wondering at the paraphrase of his own excla-