

Esther's Choice

By Lafcadio Hearn

A story of Rabbi Simon ben Yochai, which is related in the holy Midrash Shir-Hasirim of the holy Midrashim.... Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is ONE! . . .

In those days there lived in Sidon, the mighty city, a certain holy Israelite possessing much wealth, and having the esteem of all who knew him, even among the Gentiles. In all Sidon there was no man who had so beautiful a wife; for the comeliness of her seemed like that of Sarah, whose loveliness illumined all the land of Egypt.

Yet for this rich one there was no happiness: the cry of the nursling had never been heard in his home, the sound of a child's voice had never made sunshine within his heart. And he heard voices of reproach betimes, saying: "Do not the Rabbis teach that if a man have lived ten years with his wife and have no issue, then he should divorce her, giving her the marriage portion prescribed by law; for he may not have been found worthy to have his race perpetuated by her?" . . . But there were others who spake reproach of the wife, believing that her beauty had made her proud, and that her reproach was but the punishment of vainglory.

And at last, one morning, Rabbi Simon ben Yochai was aware of two visitors within the ante-chamber of his dwelling, the richest merchant of Sidon and his wife, greeting the holy man with *Salem aleikoum!* The Rabbi looked not upon the woman's face, for to gaze even upon the heel of a woman is forbidden to holy men; yet he felt the sweetness of her presence pervading all the house like the incense of the flowers woven by the hands of the Angel of Prayer. And the Rabbi knew that she was weeping.

Then the husband arose and spake: "Lo! it is now more than a time of ten years since I was wedded to Esther, I being then twenty years of age, and desirous to obey the teaching that he who remaineth unmarried after twenty transgresseth daily against God. Esther, thou knowest, O Rabbi, was the sweetest maiden in Sidon; and to me she hath ever been a most loving and sweet wife, so that I could find no fault with her; neither is there any guile in her heart.

"I have since then become a rich Israelite; the men of Tyre know me, and the merchants of Carthage swear by my name. I have many ships, bearing me ivory and gold of Ophir and jewels of great worth from the East; I have vases of onyx and cups of emeralds curiously wrought, and chariots and horses,—even so that no prince hath more than I. And this I owe to the blessing of the Holy One,—blessed be He!—and to Esther, my wife, also, who is a wise and valiant woman, and cunning in advising.

"Yet, O Rabbi, gladly would I have given all my riches that I might obtain one son! that I might be known as a father in Israel. The Holy One—blessed be He!—hath not vouchsafed me this thing; so that I have thought me found unworthy to have children by so fair and good a woman. I pray thee, therefore, that thou wilt give legal enactment to a bill of separation; for I have resolved to give Esther a bill of divorcement, and a goodly marriage portion also, that the reproach may so depart from us in the sight of Israel."

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And Rabbi Simon Len Yochai stroked thoughtfully the dim silver of his beard. A silence as of the Shechinah fell upon the three. Faintly, from afar, came floating to their ears the sea-like murmuring of Sidon's commerce. . . . Then spake the Rabbi; and Esther, looking at him, thought that his eyes smiled, although this holy man was never seen to smile with his lips. Yet it may be that his eyes smiled, seeing into their hearts: "My son, it would be a scandal in Israel to do as thou dost purpose, hastily and without becoming announcement; for men might imagine that Esther had not been a good wife, or thou a too exacting husband! It is not lawful to give cause for scorn. Therefore go to thy home, make ready a goodly feast, and invite thither all thy friends and the friends of thy wife, and those who were present at thy wedding, and speak to them as a good man to good men, and let them understand wherefore thou dost this thing, and that in Esther there is no fault. Then return to me on the morrow, and I will grant thee the bill."

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So a great feast was given, and many guests came; among them, all who had attended the wedding of Esther, save, indeed, such as Azrael had led away by the hand. There was much good wine; the meats smoked upon platters of gold, and cups of onyx were placed at the elbow of each guest. And the husband spake lovingly to his wife in the presence of all, saying: "Esther, we have lived together lovingly many years; and if we must now separate, thou knowest it is not because I do not love thee, but only because it hath not pleased the Most Holy to bless us with children. And in token that I love thee and wish thee all good, know that I desire thee to take away from my house whatever thou desirest, whether it be gold or jewels beyond price."

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So the wine went round, and the night passed in mirth and song, until the heads of the guests grew strangely heavy, and there came a buzzing in their ears as of innumerable bees, and their beards ceased to wag with laughter, and a deep sleep fell upon them.

Then Esther summoned her handmaids, and said to them: "Behold my husband sleeps heavily! I go to the house of my father; bear him thither also as he sleepeth."

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And awaking in the morning the husband found himself in a strange chamber and in a strange house. But the sweetness of a woman's presence, and the ivory fingers that caressed his beard, and the softness of the knees that pillowed his head, and the glory of the dark eyes that looked into his own awakening,—these were not strange; for he knew that his head was resting in the lap of Esther. And bewildered with the grief-born dreams of the night, he cried out, "Woman, what hast thou done?"

Then, sweeter than the voice of doves among the fig-trees, came the voice of Esther: "Didst thou not bid me, husband, that I should choose and take away from thy house whatsoever I most desired? And I have chosen thee, and have brought thee hither, to my father's home, . . . loving thee more than all else in the world. Wilt thou drive me from thee now?" And he could not see her face for tears of love; yet he heard her voice speaking on,—speaking the golden words of Ruth, which are so old yet so young to the hearts of all that love: "*Whithersoever thou shalt go, I*

will also go; and whithersoever thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. And the Angel of Death only may part us; for thou art all in all to me.”.

And in the golden sunlight at the doorway suddenly stood, like a statue of Babylonian silver, the grand gray figure of Rabbi Simon ben Yochai, lifting his hands in benediction.

“*Schmah Israel!*—the Lord our God, who is One, bless ye with everlasting benediction! May your hearts be welded by love, as gold with gold by the cunning of goldsmiths! May the Lord, who coupleth and setteth the single in families, watch over ye! The Lord make this valiant woman even as Rachel and as Lia, who built up the house of Israel! And ye shall behold your children and your children’s children in the House of the Lord!”

Even so the Lord blessed them; and Esther became as the fruitful vine, and they saw their children’s children in Israel. Forasmuch as it is written: “He will regard the prayer of the destitute.”