Herodias

by Gustave Flaubert

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HERODIAS

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CHAPTER I

In the eastern side of the Dead Sea rose the citadel of Machaerus. It was built upon a conical peak of basalt, and was surrounded by four deep valleys, one on each side, another in front, and the fourth in the rear. At the base of the citadel, crowding against one another, a group of houses stood within the circle of a wall, whose outlines undulated with the unevenness of the soil. A zigzag road, cutting through the rocks, joined the city to the fortress, the walls of which were about one hundred and twenty cubits high, having numerous angles and ornamental towers that stood out like jewels in this crown of stone overhanging an abyss.

Within the high walls stood a palace, adorned with many richly carved arches, and surrounded by a terrace that on one side of the building spread out below a wide balcony made of sycamore wood, upon which tall poles had been erected to support an awning.

One morning, just before sunrise, the tetrarch, Herod-Antipas, came out alone upon the balcony. He leaned against one of the columns and looked about him.

The crests of the hill-tops in the valley below the palace were just discernible in the light of the false dawn, although their bases, extending to the abyss, were still plunged in darkness. A light mist floated in the air; presently it lifted, and the shores of the Dead Sea became visible. The sun, rising behind Machaerus, spread a rosy flush over the sky, lighting up the stony shores, the hills, and the desert, and illuming the distant mountains of Judea, rugged and grey in the early dawn. En-gedi, the central point of the group, threw a deep black shadow; Hebron, in the background, was round-topped like a dome; Eschol had her pomegranates, Sorek her

vineyards, Carmel her fields of sesame; and the tower of Antonia, with its enormous cube, dominated Jerusalem. The tetrarch turned his gaze from it to contemplate the palms of Jericho on his right; and his thoughts dwelt upon other cities of his beloved Galilee,—Capernaum, Endor, Nazareth, Tiberias—whither it might be he would never return.

The Jordan wound its way through the arid plains that met his gaze; white and glittering under the clear sky, it dazzled the eye like snow in the rays of the sun.

The Dead Sea now looked like a sheet of lapis-lazuli; and at its southern extremity, on the coast of Yemen, Antipas recognised clearly what at first he had been able only dimly to perceive. Several tents could now be plainly seen; men carrying spears were moving about among a group of horses; and dying camp-fires shone faintly in the beams of the rising sun.

This was a troop belonging to the sheikh of the Arabs, the daughter of whom the tetrarch had repudiated in order to wed Herodias, already married to one of his brothers, who lived in Italy but who had no pretensions to power.

Antipas was waiting for assistance and reinforcements from the Romans, but as Vitellius, the Governor of Syria, had not yet arrived, he was consumed with impatience and anxiety. Perhaps Agrippa had ruined his cause with the Emperor, he thought. Philip, his third brother, sovereign of Batania, was arming himself clandestinely. The Jews were becoming intolerant of the tetrarch’s idolatries; he knew that many were weary of his rule; and he hesitated now between adopting one of two projects: to conciliate the Arabs and win back their allegiance, or to conclude an alliance with the Parthians. Under the pretext of celebrating his birthday, he had planned to bring together, at a grand banquet, the chiefs of his troops, the stewards of his domains, and the most important men from the region about Galilee.

Antipas threw a keen glance along all the roads leading to Machaerus. They were deserted. Eagles were sweeping through the air high above his head; the soldiers of

the guard, placed at intervals along the ramparts, slept or dozed, leaning against the walls; all was silent within the castle.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a distant voice, seeming to come from the very depths of the earth. His cheek paled. After an instant's hesitation, he leaned far over the balcony railing, listening intently, but the voice had died away. Presently it rose again upon the quiet air; Antipas clapped his hands together loudly, crying: "Mannaeus! Mannaeus!"

Instantly a man appeared, naked to the waist, after the fashion of a masseur at the bath. Although emaciated, and somewhat advanced in years, he was a giant in stature, and on his hip he wore a cutlass in a bronze scabbard. His bushy hair, gathered up and held in place by a kind of comb, exaggerated the apparent size of his massive head. His eyes were heavy with sleep, but his white teeth shone, his step was light on the flagstones, and his body had the suppleness of an ape, although his countenance was as impassive as that of a mummy.

"Where is he?" demanded the tetrarch of this strange being.

Mannaeus made a movement over his shoulder with his thumb, saying:

"Over there—still there!"

"I thought I heard him cry out."

And Antipas, after drawing a deep breath, asked for news of Iaokanann, afterwards known as St. John the Baptist. Had he been allowed to see the two men who had asked permission to visit his dungeon a few days before, and since that time, had any one discovered for what purpose the men desired to see him?

"They exchanged some strange words with him," Mannaeus replied, "with the mysterious air of robbers conspiring at the cross-roads. Then they departed towards Upper Galilee, saying that they were the bearers of great tidings."

Antipas bent his head for a moment; then raising it quickly, said in a tone full of

alarm:

“Guard him! watch him well! Do not allow any one else to see him. Keep the gates shut and the entrance to the dungeon closed fast. It must not even be suspected that he still lives!”

Mannaeus had already attended to all these details, because Iaokanann was a Jew, and, like all the Samaritans, Mannaeus hated the Jews.

Their temple on the Mount of Gerizim, which Moses had designed to be the centre of Israel, had been destroyed since the reign of King Hyrcanus; and the temple at Jerusalem made the Samaritans furious; they regarded its presence as an outrage against themselves, and a permanent injustice. Mannaeus, indeed, had forcibly entered it, for the purpose of defiling its altar with the bones of corpses. Several of his companions, less agile than he, had been caught and beheaded.

From the tetrarch’s balcony, the temple was visible through an opening between two hills. The sun, now fully risen, shed a dazzling splendour on its walls of snowy marble and the plates of purest gold that formed its roof. The structure shone like a luminous mountain, and its radiant purity indicated something almost superhuman, eclipsing even its suggestion of opulence and pride.

Mannaeus stretched out his powerful arm towards Zion, and, with clenched fist and his great body drawn to its full height, he launched a bitter anathema at the city, with perfect faith that eventually his curse must be effective.

Antipas listened, without appearing to be shocked at the strength of the invectives.

When the Samaritan had become somewhat calmer, he returned to the subject of the prisoner.

“Sometimes he grows excited,” said he, “then he longs to escape or talks about a speedy deliverance. At other times he is as quiet as a sick animal, although I often find him pacing to and fro in his gloomy dungeon, murmuring, ‘In order that His glory may increase, mine must diminish.’”

Antipas and Mannaeus looked at each other a moment in silence. But the tetrarch was weary of pondering on this troublesome matter.

The mountain peaks surrounding the palace, looking like great petrified waves, the black depths among the cliffs, the immensity of the blue sky, the rising sun, and the gloomy valley of the abyss, filled the soul of Antipas with a vague unrest; he felt an overwhelming sense of oppression at the sight of the desert, whose uneven piles of sand suggested crumbling amphitheaters or ruined palaces. The hot wind brought an odour of sulphur, as if it had rolled up from cities accursed and buried deeper than the river-bed of the slow-running Jordan.

These aspects of nature, which seemed to his troubled fancy signs of the wrath of the gods, terrified him, and he leaned heavily against the balcony railing, his eyes fixed, his head resting upon his hands.

Presently he felt a light touch upon his shoulder. He turned, and saw Herodias standing beside him. A purple robe enveloped her, falling to her sandaled feet. Having left her chamber hurriedly, she wore no jewels nor other ornaments. A thick tress of rippling black hair hung over her shoulder and hid itself in her bosom; her nostrils, a little too large for beauty, quivered with triumph, and her face was alight with joy. She gently shook the tetrarch’s shoulder, and exclaimed exultantly:

“Caesar is our friend! Agrippa has been imprisoned!”

“Who told thee that?”

“I know it!” she replied, adding: “It was because he coveted the crown of Caligula.”

While living upon the charity of Antipas and Herodias, Agrippa had intrigued to become king, a title for which the tetrarch was as eager as he. But if this news were true, no more was to be feared from Agrippa’s scheming.

“The dungeons of Tiberias are hard to open, and sometimes life itself is uncertain within their depths,” said Herodias, with grim significance.

Antipas understood her; and, although she was Agrippa's sister, her atrocious insinuation seemed entirely justifiable to the tetrarch. Murder and outrage were to be expected in the management of political intrigues; they were a part of the fatal inheritance of royal houses; and in the family of Herodias nothing was more common.

Then she rapidly unfolded to the tetrarch the secrets of her recent undertakings, telling him how many men had been bribed, what letters had been intercepted, and the number of spies stationed at the city gates. She did not hesitate even to tell him of her success in an attempt to befool and seduce Eutyches the denunciator.

"And why should I not?" she said; "it cost me nothing. For thee, my lord, have I not done more than that? Did I not even abandon my child?"

After her divorce from Philip, she had indeed left her daughter in Rome, hoping that, as the wife of the tetrarch, she might bear other children. Until that moment she had never spoken to Antipas of her daughter. He asked himself the reason for this sudden display of tenderness.

During their brief conversation several attendants had come out upon the balcony; one slave brought a quantity of large, soft cushions, and arranged them in a kind of temporary couch upon the floor behind his mistress. Herodias sank upon them, and turning her face away from Antipas, seemed to be weeping silently. After a few moments she dried her eyes, declared that she would dream no more, and that she was, in reality, perfectly happy. She reminded Antipas of their former long delightful interviews in the atrium; their meetings at the baths; their walks along the Sacred Way, and the sweet evening rendezvous at the villa, among the flowery groves, listening to the murmur of splashing fountains, within sight of the Roman Campagna. Her glances were as tender as in former days; she drew near to him, leaned against his breast and caressed him fondly.

But he repelled her soft advances. The love she sought to rekindle had died long

ago. He thought instead of all his misfortunes, and of the twelve long years during which the war had continued. Protracted anxiety had visibly aged the tetrarch. His shoulders were bent beneath his violet-bordered toga; his whitening locks were long and mingled with his beard, and the sunlight revealed many lines upon his brow, as well as upon that of Herodias. After the tetrarch's repulse of his wife's tender overtures, the pair gazed morosely at each other.

The mountain paths began to show signs of life. Shepherds were driving their flocks to pasture; children urged heavy-laden donkeys along the roads; while grooms belonging to the palace led the horses to the river to drink. The wayfarers descending from the heights on the farther side of Machaerus disappeared behind the castle; others ascended from the valleys, and after arriving at the palace deposited their burdens in the courtyard. Many of these were purveyors to the tetrarch; others were the servants of his expected guests, arriving in advance of their masters.

Suddenly, at the foot of the terrace on the left, an Essene appeared; he wore a white robe, his feet were bare, and his demeanour indicated that he was a follower of the Stoics. Mannaeus instantly rushed towards the stranger, drawing the cutlass that he wore upon his hip.

"Kill him!" cried Herodias.

"Do not touch him!" the tetrarch commanded.

The two men stood motionless for an instant, then they descended the terrace, both taking a different direction, although they kept their eyes fixed upon each other.

"I know that man," said Herodias, after they had disappeared. "His name is Phanuel, and he will try to seek out Iaokanann, since thou wert so foolish as to allow him to live."

Antipas said that the man might some day be useful to them. His attacks upon Jerusalem would gain them the allegiance of the rest of the Jews.

"No," said Herodias, "the Jews will accept any master, and are incapable of feeling

any true patriotism.” She added that, as for the man who was trying to influence the people with hopes cherished since the days of Nehemiah, the best policy was to suppress him.

The tetrarch replied that there was no haste about the matter, and expressed his doubt that any real danger was to be feared from Iaokanann even affecting to laugh at the idea.

“Do not deceive thyself!” exclaimed Herodias. And she retold the story of her humiliation one day when she was travelling towards Gilead, in order to purchase some of the balm for which that region was famous.

“A multitude was standing on the banks of the stream, my lord; many of the people were putting on their raiment. Standing on a hillock, a strange man was speaking to the gathering. A camel’s-skin was wrapped about his loins, and his head was like that of a lion. As soon as he saw me, he launched in my direction all the maledictions of the prophets. His eyes flamed, his voice shook, he raised his arms as if he would draw down lightning upon my head. I could not fly from him; the wheels of my chariot sank in the sand up to the middle; and I could only crawl along, hiding my head with my mantle, and frozen with terror at the curses that poured upon me like a storm from heaven!”

Continuing her harangue, she declared that the knowledge that this man still existed poisoned her very life. When he had been seized and bound with cords, the soldiers were prepared to stab him if he resisted, but he had been quite gentle and obedient. After he had been thrown into prison some one had put venomous serpents into his dungeon, but strange to say, after a time they had died, leaving him uninjured. The inanity of such tricks exasperated Herodias. Besides, she inquired, why did this man make war upon her? What interest moved him to such actions? His injurious words to her, uttered before a throng of listeners, had been repeated and widely circulated; she heard them whispered everywhere. Against a legion of soldiers she would have

been brave; but this mysterious influence, more pernicious and powerful than the sword, but impossible to grasp, was maddening! Herodias strode to and fro upon the terrace, white with rage, unable to find words to express the emotions that choked her.

She had a haunting fear that the tetrarch might listen to public opinion after a time, and persuade himself it was his duty to repudiate her. Then, indeed, all would be lost! Since early youth she had cherished a dream that some day she would rule over a great empire. As an important step towards attaining this ambition, she had deserted Philip, her first husband, and married the tetrarch, who now she thought had duped her.

“Ah! I found a powerful support, indeed, when I entered thy family!” she sneered.

“It is at least the equal of thine,” Antipas replied.

Herodias felt the blood of the kings and priests, her ancestors, boiling in her veins.

“Thy grandfather was a servile attendant upon the temple of Ascalon!” she went on, with fury. “Thy other ancestors were shepherds, bandits, conductors of caravans, a horde of slaves offered as tribute to King David! My forefathers were the conquerors of thine! The first of the Maccabees drove thy people out of Hebron; Hyrcanus forced them to be circumcised!” Then, with all the contempt of the patrician for the plebeian, the hatred of Jacob for Esau, she reproached him for his indifference towards palpable outrages to his dignity, his weakness regarding the Phoenicians, who had been false to him, and his cowardly attitude towards the people who detested and insulted herself.

“But thou art like them!” she cried; “Dost regret the loss of the Arab girl who danced upon these very pavements? Take her back! Go and live with her—in her tent! Eat her bread, baked in the ashes! Drink curdled sheep’s-milk! Kiss her dark cheeks—and forget me!”

The tetrarch had already forgotten her presence, it appeared. He paid no further heed

to her anger, but looked intently at a young girl who had just stepped out upon the balcony of a house not far away. At her side stood an elderly female slave, who held over the girl's head a kind of parasol with a handle made of long, slender reeds. In the middle of the rug spread upon the floor of the balcony stood a large open travelling-hamper or basket, and girdles, veils, head-dresses, and gold and silver ornaments were scattered about in confusion. At intervals the young girl took one object or another in her hands, and held it up admiringly. She was dressed in the costume of the Roman ladies, with a flowing tunic and a peplum ornamented with tassels of emeralds; and blue silken bands confined her hair, which seemed almost too luxuriant, since from time to time she raised a small hand to push back the heavy masses. The parasol half hid the maiden from the gaze of Antipas, but now and then he caught a glimpse of her delicate neck, her large eyes, or a fleeting smile upon her small mouth. He noted that her figure swayed about with a singularly elastic grace and elegance. He leaned forward, his eyes kindled, his breath quickened. All this was not lost upon Herodias, who watched him narrowly.

"Who is that maiden?" the tetrarch asked at last.

Herodias replied that she did not know, and her fierce demeanour suddenly changed to one of gentleness and amiability.

At the entrance to the castle the tetrarch was awaited by several Galileans, the master of the scribes, the chief of the land stewards, the manager of the salt mines, and a Jew from Babylon, commanding his troops of horse. As the tetrarch approached the group, he was greeted with respectful enthusiasm. Acknowledging the acclamations with a grave salute, he entered the castle.

As he proceeded along one of the corridors, Phanuel suddenly sprang from a corner and intercepted him.

"What! Art thou still here?" said the tetrarch in displeasure. "Thou seekest Iaokanann, no doubt."

“And thyself, my lord. I have something of great importance to tell thee.”

At a sign from Antipas, the Essene followed him into a somewhat dark and gloomy room.

The daylight came faintly through a grated window. The walls were of a deep shade of crimson, so dark as to look almost black. At one end of the room stood an ebony bed, ornamented with bands of leather. A shield of gold, hanging at the head of the bed, shone like a sun in the obscurity of the apartment. Antipas crossed over to the couch and threw himself upon it in a half-reclining attitude, while Phanuel remained standing before him. Suddenly he raised one hand, and striking a commanding attitude said:

“At times, my lord, the Most High sends a message to the people through one of His sons. Iaokanann is one of these. If thou oppress him, thou shalt be punished!”

“But it is he that persecutes me!” exclaimed Antipas. “He asked me to do a thing that was impossible. Since then he has done nothing but revile me. And I was not severe with him when he began his abuse of me. But he had the hardihood to send various men from Machaerus to spread dissension and discontent throughout my domain. A curse upon him! Since he attacks me, I shall defend myself.”

“Without doubt, he has expressed his anger with too much violence,” Phanuel replied calmly. “But do not heed that further. He must be set free.”

“One does not let loose a furious animal,” said the tetrarch.

“Have no fear of him now,” was the quick reply. “He will go straight to the Arabs, the Gauls, and the Scythians. His work must be extended to the uttermost ends of the earth.”

For a moment Antipas appeared lost in thought, as one who sees a vision. Then he said:

“His power over men is indeed great. In spite of myself, I admire him!”

“Then set him free!”

But the tetrarch shook his head. He feared Herodias, Mannaeus, and unknown dangers.

Phanuel tried to persuade him, promising, as a guaranty of the honesty of his projects, the submission of the Essenians to the King. These poor people, clad only in linen, untameable in spite of severe treatment, endowed with the power to divine the future by reading the stars, had succeeded in commanding a certain degree of respect.

“What is the important matter thou wouldst communicate to me?” Antipas inquired, with sudden recollection.

Before Phanuel could reply, a Negro entered the room in great haste. He was covered with dust, and panted so violently that he could scarcely utter the single word:

“Vitellus!”

“Has he arrived?” asked the tetrarch.

“I have seen him, my lord. Within three hours he will be here.”

Throughout the palace, doors were opening and closing and portieres were swaying as if in a high wind, with the coming and going of many persons; there was a murmur of voices; sounds of the moving of heavy furniture could be heard, and the rattle of silver plates and dishes. From the highest tower a loud blast upon a conch summoned from far and near all the slaves belonging to the castle.

CHAPTER II

The ramparts were thronged with people when at last Vitellius entered the castle gates, leaning on the arm of his interpreter. Behind them came an imposing red litter, decorated with plumes and mirrors. The proconsul wore a toga ornamented

with the laticlave, a broad purple band extending down the front of the garment, indicating his rank; and his feet were encased in the kind of buskins worn by consuls. A guard of lictors surrounded him. Against the wall they placed their twelve fasces—a bundle of sticks with an axe in the centre. And the populace trembled before the insignia of Roman majesty.

The gorgeous litter, borne by eight men, came to a halt. From it descended a youth. He wore many pearls upon his fingers, but he had a protruding abdomen and his face was covered with pimples. A cup of aromatic wine was offered to him. He drank it, and asked for a second draught.

The tetrarch had fallen upon his knees before the proconsul, saying that he was grieved beyond words not to have known sooner of the favour of his presence within those domains; had he been aware of the approach of his distinguished guest, he would have issued a command that every person along the route should place himself at the proconsul’s orders. Of a surety, the proconsul’s family was descended direct from the goddess Vitellia. A highway, leading from the Janiculum to the sea, still bore their name. Questors and consuls were innumerable in that great family; and as for the noble Lucius, now his honoured guest, it was the duty of the whole people to thank him, as the conqueror of the Cliti and the father of the young Aulus, now returning to his own domain, since the East was the country of the gods. These hyperboles were expressed in Latin, and Vitellius accepted them impassively.

He replied that the great Herod was the honour and glory of the nation; that the Athenians had chosen him to direct the Olympian games; that he had built temples in the honour of Augustus; had been patient, ingenious, terrible; and was faithful to all the Caesars.

Between the two marble columns, with bronze capitals, Herodias could now be seen advancing with the air of an empress, in the midst of a group of women and eunuchs carrying perfumed torches set in sockets of silver-gilt.

The proconsul advanced three steps to meet her. She saluted him with an inclination of her head.

“How fortunate,” she exclaimed, “that henceforth Agrippa, the enemy of Tiberius, can work harm no longer!”

Vitellius did not understand her allusion, but he thought her a dangerous woman. Antipas immediately declared that he was ready to do anything for the emperor.

“Even to the injury of others?” Vitellius asked, significantly.

He had taken hostages from the king of the Parthians, but the emperor had given no further thought to the matter, because Antipas, who had been present at the conference, had, in order to gain favour, sent off despatches bearing the news. From that time he had borne a profound hatred towards the emperor and had delayed in sending assistance to him.

The tetrarch stammered in attempting to reply to the query of the proconsul. But Aulus laughed and said: “Do not be disturbed. I will protect thee!”

The proconsul feigned not to hear this remark. The fortune of the father depended, in a way, on the corrupt influence of the son; and through him it was possible that Antipas might be able to procure for the proconsul very substantial benefits, although the glances that he cast about him were defiant, and even venomous.

But now a new tumult arose just within the gates. A file of white mules entered the courtyard, mounted by men in priestly garb. These were the Sadducees and the Pharisees, who were drawn to Machaerus by the same ambition: the one party hoping to be appointed public sacrificers, the other determined to retain those offices. Their faces were dark, particularly those of the Pharisees, who were enemies of Rome and of the tetrarch. The flowing skirts of their tunics embarrassed their movements as they attempted to pass through the throng; and their tiaras sat unsteadily upon their brows, around which were bound small bands of parchment, showing lines of writing.

Almost at the same moment, the soldiers of the advance guard arrived. Cloth coverings had been drawn over their glittering shields to protect them from the dust. Behind them came Marcellus, the proconsul's lieutenant, followed by the publicans, carrying their tablets of wood under their arms.

Antipas named to Vitellius the principle personages surrounding them: Tolmai, Kanthera, Schon, Ammonius of Alexandria, who brought asphalt for Antipas; Naaman, captain of his troops of skirmishers, and Jacim, the Babylonian.

Vitellius had noticed Mannaeus.

"Who is that man?" he inquired.

The tetrarch by a significant gesture indicated that Mannaeus was the executioner. He then presented the Sadducees to the proconsul's notice.

Jonathas, a man of low stature, who spoke Greek, advanced with a firm step and begged that the great lord would honour Jerusalem with a visit. Vitellius replied that he should probably go to Jerusalem soon.

Eleazar, who had a crooked nose and a long beard, put forth a claim, in behalf of the Pharisees, for the mantle of the high priest, held in the tower of Antonia by the civil authorities.

Then the Galileans came forward and denounced Pontius Pilate. On one occasion, they said, a mad-man went seeking in a cave near Samaria for the golden vases that had belonged to King David, and Pontius Pilate had caused several inhabitants of that region to be executed. In their excitement all the Galileans spoke at once, Mannaeus's voice being heard above all others. Vitellius promised that the guilty ones should be punished.

Fresh vociferations now broke out in front of the great gates, where the soldiers had hung their shields. Their coverings having now been removed, on each shield a carving of the head of Caesar could be seen on the umbo, or central knob. To the Jews, this seemed an evidence of nothing short of idolatry. Antipas harangued them,

while Vitellius, who occupied a raised seat within the shadow of the colonnade, was astonished at their fury. Tiberius had done well, he thought, to exile four hundred of these people to Sardinia. Presently the Jews became so violent that he ordered the shields to be removed.

Then the multitude surrounded the proconsul, imploring him to abolish certain unjust laws, asking for privileges, or begging for alms. They rent their clothing and jostled one another; and at last, in order to drive them back, several slaves, armed with long staves, charged upon them, striking right and left. Those nearest the gates made their escape and descended to the road; others rushed in to take their place, so that two streams of human beings flowed in and out, compressed within the limits of the gateway.

Vitellius demanded the reason for the assembling of so great a throng. Antipas explained that they had been invited to come to a feast in celebration of his birthday; and he pointed to several men who, leaning against the battlements, were hauling up immense basket-loads of food, fruits, vegetables, antelopes, and storks; large fish, of a brilliant shade of blue; grapes, melons, and pyramids of pomegranates. At this sight, Aulus left the courtyard and hastened to the kitchens, led by his taste for gormandizing, which later became the amazement of the world.

As they passed the opening to a small cellar, Vitellius perceived some objects resembling breast-plates hanging on a wall. He looked at them with interest, and then demanded that the subterranean chambers of the fortress be thrown open for his inspection. These chambers were cut into the rocky foundation of the castle, and had been formed into vaults, with pillars set at regular distances. The first vault opened contained old armour; the second was full of pikes, with long points emerging from tufts of feathers. The walls of the third chamber were hung with a kind of tapestry made of slender reeds, laid in perpendicular rows. Those of the fourth were covered with scimitars. In the middle of the fifth cell, rows of helmets were seen, the crests

of which looked like a battalion of fiery serpents. The sixth cell contained nothing but empty quivers; the seventh, greaves for protecting the legs in battle; the eighth vault was filled with bracelets and armlets; and an examination of the remaining vaults disclosed forks, grappling-irons, ladders, cords, even catapults, and bells for the necks of camels; and as they descended deeper into the rocky foundation, it became evident that the whole mass was a veritable honeycomb of cells, and that below those already seen were many others.

Vitellius, Phineas, his interpreter, and Sisenna, chief of the publicans, walked among these gloomy cells, attended by three eunuchs bearing torches.

In the deep shadows hideous instruments, invented by barbarians, could be seen: tomahawks studded with nails; poisoned javelins; pincers resembling the jaws of crocodiles; in short, the tetrarch possessed in his castle munitions of war sufficient for forty thousand men.

He had accumulated these weapons in anticipation of an alliance against him among his enemies. But he bethought him that the proconsul might believe, or assert, that he had collected this armoury in order to attack the Romans; so he hastened to offer explanations of all that Vitellius had observed.

Some of these things did not belong to him at all, he said: many of them were necessary to defend the place against brigands and marauders, especially the Arabs. Many of the objects in the vault had been the property of his father, and he had allowed them to remain untouched. As he spoke, he managed to get in advance of the proconsul and preceded him along the corridors with rapid steps. Presently he halted and stood close against the wall as the party came up; he spoke quickly, standing with his hands on his hips, so that his voluminous mantle covered a wide space of the wall behind him. But just above his head the top of a door was visible. Vitellius remarked it instantly, and demanded to know what it concealed.

The tetrarch explained that the door was fastened, and that none could open it save

the Babylonian, Jacim.

“Summon him, then!” was the command.

A slave was sent to find Jacim, while the group awaited his coming.

The father of Jacim had come from the banks of the Euphrates to offer his services, as well as those of five hundred horsemen, in the defence of the eastern frontier. After the division of the kingdom, Jacim had lived for a time with Philip, and was now in the service of Antipas.

Presently he appeared among the vaults, carrying an archer’s bow on his shoulder and a whip in his hand. Cords of many colours were lashed tightly about his knotted legs; his massive arms were thrust through a sleeveless tunic, and a fur cap shaded his face. His chin was covered with a heavy, curling beard.

He appeared not to comprehend what the interpreter said to him at first. But Vitellius threw a meaning glance at Antipas, who quickly made the Babylonian understand the command of the proconsul. Jacim immediately laid both his hands against the door, giving it a powerful shove; whereupon it quietly slid out of sight into the wall.

A wave of hot air surged from the depths of the cavern. A winding path descended and turned abruptly. The group followed it, and soon arrived at the threshold of a kind of grotto, somewhat larger than the other subterranean cells.

An arched window at the back of this chamber gave directly upon a precipice, which formed a defence for one side of the castle. A honeysuckle vine, cramped by the low-studded ceiling, blossomed bravely. The sound of a running stream could be heard distinctly. In this place was a great number of beautiful white horses, perhaps a hundred. They were eating barley from a plank placed on a level with their mouths. Their manes had been coloured a deep blue; their hoofs were wrapped in coverings of woven grass, and the hair between their ears was puffed out like a peruke. As they stood quietly eating, they switched their tails gently to and fro. The

proconsul regarded them in silent admiration.

They were indeed wonderful animals; supple as serpents, light as birds. They were trained to gallop rapidly, following the arrow of the rider, and dash into the midst of a group of the enemy, overturning men and biting them savagely as they fell. They were sure-footed among rocky passes, and would jump fearlessly over yawning chasms; and, while ready to gallop across the plains a whole day without tiring, they would stop instantly at the command of the rider.

As soon as Jacim entered their quarters, they trotted up to him, as sheep crowd around the shepherd; and, thrusting forward their sleek necks, they looked at him with a gaze like that of inquiring children. From force of habit, he emitted a raucous cry, which excited them; they pranced about, impatient at their confinement and longing to run.

Antipas, fearing that if Vitellius knew of the existence of these creatures, he would take them away, had shut them up in this place, made especially to accommodate animals in case of siege.

“This close confinement cannot be good for them,” said Vitellius, “and there is a risk of losing them by keeping them here. Make an inventory of their number, Sisenna.”

The publican drew a writing-tablet from the folds of his robe, counted the horses, and recorded the number carefully.

It was the habit of the agents of the fiscal companies to corrupt the governors in order to pillage the provinces. Sisenna was among the most flourishing of these agents, and was seen everywhere with his claw-like fingers and his eyelids continually blinking.

After a time the party returned to the court. Heavy, round bronze lids, sunk in the stones of the pavement, covered the cisterns of the palace. Vitellius noticed that one of these was larger than the others, and that when struck by his foot it had not their

sonority. He struck them all, one after another; then stamped upon the ground and shouted:

“I have found it! I have found the buried treasure of Herod!”

Searching for buried treasure was a veritable mania among the Romans.

The tetrarch swore that no treasure was hidden in that spot.

“What is concealed there, then?” the proconsul demanded.

“Nothing—that is, only a man—a prisoner.”

“Show him to me!”

The tetrarch hesitated to obey, fearing that the Jews would discover his secret. His reluctance to lift the cover made Vitellius impatient.

“Break it in!” he cried to his lictors. Mannaeus heard the command, and, seeing a lictor step forward armed with a hatchet, he feared that the man intended to behead Iaokanann. He stayed the hand of the lictor after the first blow, and then slipped between the heavy lid and the pavement a kind of hook. He braced his long, lean arms, raised the cover slowly, and in a moment it lay flat upon the stones. The bystanders admired the strength of the old man.

Under the bronze lid was a wooden trap-door of the same size. At a blow of the fist it folded back, allowing a wide hole to be seen, the mouth of an immense pit, with a flight of winding steps leading down into the darkness. Those that bent over to peer into the cavern beheld a vague and terrifying shape in its depths.

This proved to be a human being, lying on the ground. His long locks hung over a camel’s-hair robe that covered his shoulders. Slowly he rose to his feet. His head touched a grating embedded in the wall; and as he moved about he disappeared, from time to time, in the shadows of his dungeon.

The rich tiaras of the Romans sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight, and their glittering sword-hilts threw out glancing golden rays. The doves, flying from their cotes,

circled above the heads of the multitude. It was the hour when Mannaeus was accustomed to feed them. But now he crouched beside the tetrarch, who stood near Vitellius. The Galileans, the priests, and the soldiers formed a group behind them; all were silent, waiting with painful anticipation for what might happen.

A deep groan, hollow and startling, rose from the pit.

Herodias heard it from the farther end of the palace. Drawn by an irresistible though terrible fascination, she made her way through the throng, and, reaching Mannaeus, she leant one hand on his shoulder and bent over to listen.

The hollow voice rose again from the depths of the earth.

“Woe to thee, Sadducees and Pharisees! Thy voices are like the tinkling of cymbals! O race of vipers, bursting with pride!”

The voice of Iaokanann was recognised. His name was whispered about. Spectators from a distance pressed closer to the open pit.

“Woe to thee, O people! Woe to the traitors of Judah, and to the drunkards of Ephraim, who dwelt in the fertile valleys and stagger with the fumes of wine!

“May they disappear like running water; like the slug that sinks into the sand as it moves; like an abortion that never sees the light!

“And thou too, Moab! hide thyself in the midst of the cypress, like the sparrow; in caverns, like the wild hare! The gates of the fortress shall be crushed more easily than nut-shells; the walls shall crumble; cities shall burn; and the scourge of God shall not cease! He shall cause your bodies to be bathed in your own blood, like wool in the dyer’s vat. He shall rend you, as with a harrow; He shall scatter the remains of your bodies from the tops of the mountains!”

Of which conqueror was he speaking? Was it Vitellius? Only the Romans could bring about such an extermination. The people began to cry out: “Enough! enough! let him speak no more!”

But the prisoner continued in louder tones:

“Beside the corpses of their mothers, thy little ones shall drag themselves over the ashes of the burned cities. At night men will creep from their hiding-places to seek a bit of food among the ruins, even at the risk of being cut down with the sword. Jackals shall pick thy bones in the public places, where at eventide the fathers were wont to gather. At the bidding of Gentiles, thy maidens shall be forced to cease their lamentations and to make music upon the zither, and the bravest of thy sons shall learn to bend their backs, chafed with heavy burdens.”

The listeners remembered the days of exile, and all the misfortunes and catastrophes of the past. These words were like the anathemas of the ancient prophets. The captive thundered them forth like bolts from heaven.

Presently his voice became almost as sweet and harmonious as if he were uttering a chant. He spoke of the world’s redemption from sin and sorrow; of the glories of heaven; of gold in place of clay; of the desert blossoming like the rose. “That which is now worth sixty pieces of silver will not cost a single obol. Fountains of milk shall spring from the rocks; men shall sleep, well satisfied, among the wine-presses. The people shall prostrate themselves before Thee, and Thy reign shall be eternal, O Son of David!”

The tetrarch suddenly recoiled from the opening of the pit; the mention of the existence of a son of David seemed to him like a menace to himself.

Iaokanann then poured forth invectives against him for presuming to aspire to royalty.

“There is no other king than the Eternal God!” he cried; and he cursed Antipas for his luxurious gardens, his statues, his furniture of carved ivory and precious woods, comparing him to the impious Ahab.

Antipas broke the slender cord attached to the royal seal that he wore around his neck, and throwing the seal into the pit, he commanded his prisoner to be silent.

But Iaokanann replied: “I shall cry aloud like a savage bear, like the wild ass, like a woman in travail! The punishment of heaven has already visited itself upon thy incest! May God inflict thee with the sterility of mules!”

At these words, a sound of suppressed laughter arose here and there among the listeners.

Vitellius had remained close to the opening of the dungeon while Iaokanann was speaking. His interpreter, in impassive tones, translated into the Roman tongue all the threats and invectives that rolled up from the depths of the gloomy prison. The tetrarch and Herodias felt compelled to remain near at hand. Antipas listened, breathing heavily; while the woman, with parted lips, gazed into the darkness of the pit, her face drawn with an expression of fear and hatred.

The terrible man now turned towards her. He grasped the bars of his prison, pressed against them his bearded face, in which his eyes glowed like burning coals, and cried:

“Ah! Is it thou, Jezebel? Thou hast captured thy lord’s heart with the tinkling of thy feet. Thou didst neigh to him like a mare. Thou didst prepare thy bed on the mountain top, in order to accomplish thy sacrifices!

“The Lord shall take from thee thy sparkling jewels, thy purple robes and fine linen; the bracelets from thine arms, the anklets from thy feet; the golden ornaments that dangle upon thy brow, thy mirrors of polished silver, thy fans of ostrich plumes, thy shoes with their heels of mother-of-pearl, that serve to increase thy stature; thy glittering diamonds, the scent of thy hair, the tint of thy nails,—all the artifices of thy coquetry shall disappear, and missiles shall be found wherewith to stone the adulteress!”

Herodias looked around for some one to defend her. The Pharisees lowered their eyes hypocritically. The Sadducees turned away their heads, fearing to offend the proconsul should they appear to sympathise with her. Antipas was almost in a

swoon.

Louder still rose the voice from the dungeon; the neighbouring hills gave back an echo with startling effect, and Machaerus seemed actually surrounded and showered with curses.

“Prostrate thyself in the dust, daughter of Babylon, and scourge thyself! Remove thy girdle and thy shoes, gather up thy garments and walk through the flowing stream; thy shame shall follow thee, thy disgrace shall be known to all men, thy bosom shall be rent with sobs. God execrates the stench of thy crimes! Accursed one! die like a dog!”

At that instant the trap-door was suddenly shut down and secured by Mannaeus, who would have liked to strangle Iaokanann then and there.

Herodias glided away and disappeared within the palace. The Pharisees were scandalised at what they had heard. Antipas, standing among them, attempted to justify his past conduct and to excuse his present situation.

“Without doubt,” said Eleazar, “it was necessary for him to marry his brother’s wife; but Herodias was not a widow, and besides, she had a child, which she abandoned; and that was an abomination.”

“You are wrong,” objected Jonathas the Sadducee; “the law condemns such marriages but does not actually forbid them.”

“What matters it? All the world shows me injustice,” said Antipas, bitterly; “and why? Did not Absalom lie with his father’s wives, Judah with his daughter-in-law, Ammon with his sister, and Lot with his daughters?”

Aulus, who had been reposing within the palace, now reappeared in the court. After he had heard how matters stood, he approved of the attitude of the tetrarch. “A man should never allow himself to be annoyed,” said he, “by such foolish criticism.” And he laughed at the censure of the priests and the fury of Iaokanann, saying that his words were of little importance.

Herodias, who also had reappeared, and now stood at the top of a flight of steps, called loudly:

“You are wrong, my lord! He ordered the people to refuse to pay the tax!”

“Is that true?” he demanded. The general response was affirmative, Antipas adding his word to the declaration of the others.

Vitellius had a misgiving that the prisoner might be able to escape; and as the conduct of Antipas appeared to him rather suspicious, he established his own sentinels at the gates, at intervals along the walls, and in the courtyard itself.

At last he retired to the apartments assigned to him, accompanied by the priests. Without touching directly upon the question of the coveted offices of public sacrificers, each one laid his own grievances before the proconsul. They fairly beset him with complaints and requests, but he soon dismissed them from his presence.

As Jonathas left the proconsul’s apartments he perceived Antipas standing under an arch, talking to an Essene, who wore a long white robe and flowing locks. Jonathas regretted that he had raised his voice in defence of the tetrarch.

One thought now consoled Herod-Antipas. He was no longer personally responsible for the fate of Iaokanann. The Romans had assumed that charge. What a relief! He had noticed Phanuel pacing slowly through the court, and calling him to his side, he pointed put the guards established by Vitellius, saying:

“They are stronger than I! I cannot now set the prisoner free! It is not my fault if he remains in his dungeon.”

The courtyard was empty. The slaves were sleeping. The day was drawing to a close, and the sunset spread a deep rosy glow over the horizon, against which the smallest objects stood out like silhouettes. Antipas was able to distinguish the excavations of the salt-mines at the farther end of the Dead Sea, but the tents of the Arabs were no longer visible. As the moon rose, the effect of the day’s excitement passed away, and a feeling of peace entered his heart.

Phanuel, also wearied by the recent agitating scenes, remained beside the tetrarch. He sat in silence for some time, his chin resting on his breast. At last he spoke in confidence to Antipas, and revealed what he had wished to say.

From the beginning of the month, he said, he had been studying the heavens every morning before daybreak, when the constellation of Perseus was at the zenith; Agalah was scarcely visible; Algol was even less bright; Mira-Cetus had disappeared entirely; from all of which he augured the death of some man of great importance, to occur that very night in Machaerus.

Who was the man? Vitellius was too closely guarded to be reached. No one would kill Iaokanann.

“It is I!” thought the tetrarch.

It might be that the Arabs would return and make a successful attack upon him. Perhaps the proconsul would discover his relations with the Parthians. Several men whom Antipas had recognised as hired assassins from Jerusalem, had escorted the priests in the train of the proconsul; they all carried daggers concealed beneath their robes. The tetrarch had no doubt whatever of the exactness of Phanuel’s skill in astrology.

Suddenly he bethought him of Herodias. He would consult her. He hated her, certainly, but she might give him courage; and besides, in spite of his dislike, not all the bonds were yet broken of that sorcery which once she had woven about him.

When he entered her chamber, he was met by the pungent odour of cinnamon burning in a porphyry vase and the perfume of powders, unguents, cloud-like gauzes and embroideries light as feathers, filled the air with fragrance.

He did not speak of Phanuel’s prophecy, nor of his own fear of the Jews and the Arabs. Herodias had already accused him of cowardice. He spoke only of the Romans, and complained that Vitellius had not confided to him any of his military projects. He said he supposed the proconsul was the friend of Caligula, who often

visited Agrippa; and expressed a surmise that he himself might be exiled, or that perhaps his throat would be cut.

Herodias, who now treated him with a kind of disdainful indulgence, tried to reassure him. At last she took from a small casket a curious medallion, ornamented with a profile of Tiberius. The sight of it, she said, as she gave it to Antipas, would make the lictors turn pale and silence all accusing voices.

Antipas, filled with gratitude, asked her how the medallion had come into her possession.

“It was given to me,” was her only answer.

At that moment Antipas beheld a bare arm slipping through a portiere hanging in front of him. It was the arm of a youthful woman, as graceful in outline as if carved from ivory by Polyclitus. With a movement a little awkward and at the same time charming, it felt about the wall an instant, as if seeking something, then took down a tunic hanging upon a hook near the doorway, and disappeared.

An elderly female attendant passed quietly through the room, lifted the portiere, and went out. A sudden recollection pierced the memory of the tetrarch.

“Is that woman one of thy slaves?” he asked.

“What matters that to thee?” was the disdainful reply.

CHAPTER III

The great banqueting-hall was filled with guests. This apartment had three naves, like a basilica, which were separated by columns of sandalwood, whose capitals were of sculptured bonze. On each side of the apartment was a gallery for spectators, and a third, with a facade of gold filigree, was at one end, opposite an immense arch at the other.

The candelabra burning on the tables, which were spread the whole length of the

banqueting-hall, glowed like clusters of flaming flowers among the painted cups, the plates of shining copper, the cubes of snow and heaps of luscious grapes. Through the large windows the guests could see lighted torches on the terraces of the neighbouring houses; for this night Antipas was giving a feast to his friends, his own people, and to anyone that presented himself at the castle.

The slaves, alert as dogs, glided about noiselessly in felt sandals, carrying dishes to and fro.

The table of the proconsul was placed beneath the gilded balcony upon a platform of sycamore wood. Rich tapestries from Babylon were hung about the pavilion, giving a certain effect of seclusion.

Upon three ivory couches, one facing the great hall, and the other two placed one on either side of the pavilion, reclined Vitellius, his son Aulus, and Antipas; the proconsul being near the door, at the left, Aulus on the right, the tetrarch occupying the middle couch.

Antipas wore a heavy black mantle, the texture of which was almost hidden by coloured embroideries and glittering decorations; his beard was spread out like a fan; blue powder had been scattered over his hair, and on his head rested a diadem covered with precious stones. Vitellius still wore the purple band, the emblem of his rank, crossed diagonally over a linen toga.

Aulus had tied behind his back the sleeves of his violet robe, embroidered with silver. His clustering curls were laid in carefully arranged rows; a necklace of sapphires gleamed against his throat, plump and white as that of a woman. Crouched upon a rug near him, with legs crossed was a pretty white boy, upon whose face shone a perpetual smile. Aulus had found him somewhere among the kitchens and had taken a violent fancy to him. He had made the child one of his suite, but as he never could remember his protege’s Chaldean name, called him simply “the Asiatic.” From time to time the little fellow sprang up and played about the

dining-table, and his antics appeared to amuse the guests.

At one side of the tetrarch's pavilion were the tables at which were seated his priests and officers; also a number of persons from Jerusalem, and the more important men from the Grecian cities. At the table on the left of the proconsul sat Marcellus with the publicans, several friends of the tetrarch, and various representatives from Cana, Ptolemais, and Jericho. Seated at other tables were mountaineers from Liban and many of the old soldiers of Herod's army; a dozen Thracians, a Greek and two Germans; besides huntsmen and herdsmen, the Sultan of Palmyra, and sailors from Eziongaber. Before each guest was placed a roll of soft bread, upon which to wipe the fingers. As soon as they were seated, hands were stretched out with the eagerness of a vulture's claws, seizing upon olives, pistachios, and almonds. Every face was joyous, every head was crowned with flowers, except those of the Pharisees, who refused to wear the wreaths, regarding them as a symbol of Roman voluptuousness and vice. They shuddered when the attendants sprinkled them with galburnum and incense, the use of which the Pharisees reserved strictly for services in the Temple.

Antipas observed that Aulus rubbed himself under the arms, as if annoyed by heat or chafing; and promised to give him three flasks of the same kind of precious balm that had been used by Cleopatra.

A captain from the garrison of Tiberias who had just arrived, placed himself behind the tetrarch as protection in case any unexpected trouble should arise. But his attention was divided between observing the movements of the proconsul and listening to the conversation of his neighbours.

There was, naturally, much talk of Iaokanann, and other men of his stamp.

"It is said," remarked one of the guests, "that Simon of Gitta washed away his sins in fire. And a certain man called Jesus—"

"He is the worst of them all!" interrupted Eleazar. "A miserable imposter!"

At this a man sprang up from a table near the tetrarch’s pavilion, and made his way towards the place where Eleazar sat. His face was almost as pale as his linen robe, but he addressed the Pharisees boldly, saying: “That is a lie! Jesus has performed miracles!”

Antipas expressed a long-cherished desire to see the man Jesus perform some of his so-called miracles. “You should have brought him with you,” he said to the last speaker, who was still standing. “Tell us what you know about him,” he commanded.

Then the stranger said that he himself, whose name was Jacob, having a daughter who was very ill, had gone to Capernaum to implore the Master to heal his child. The Master had answered him, saying: “Return to thy home: she is healed!” And he had found his daughter standing at the threshold of his house, having risen from her couch when the gnomon had marked the third hour, the same moment when he had made his supplication to Jesus.

The Pharisees admitted that certain mysterious arts and powerful herbs existed that would heal the sick. It was said that the marvellous plant known as “baaras” grew even in Machaerus, the power of which rendered its consumer invulnerable against all attacks; but to cure disease without seeing or touching the afflicted person was clearly impossible, unless, indeed, the man Jesus called in the assistance of evil spirits.

The friends of Antipas and the men from Galilee nodded wisely, saying: “It is evident that he is aided by demons of some sort!”

Jacob, standing between their table and that of the priests, maintained a silence at once lofty and respectful.

Several voices exclaimed: “Prove his power to us!”

Jacob leaned over the priests’ table, and said slowly, in a half-suppressed tone, as if awe-struck by his own words:

“Know ye not, then, that He is the Messiah?”

The priests stared at one another, and Vitellius demanded the meaning of the word. His interpreter paused a moment before translating it. Then he said that Messiah was the name to be given to one who was to come, bringing the enjoyment of all blessings, and giving them domination over all the peoples of the earth. Certain persons believed that there were to be two Messiahs; one would be vanquished by Gog and Magog, the demons of the North; but the other would exterminate the Prince of Evil; and for centuries the coming of this Saviour of mankind had been expected at any moment.

At this, the priests began to talk in low tones among themselves. Eleazar addressed Jacob, saying that it had always been understood that the Messiah would be a son of David, not of a carpenter; and that he would confirm the law, whereas this Nazarene attacked it. Furthermore, as a still stronger argument against the pretender, it had been promised that the Messiah should be preceded by Elias.

“But Elias has come!” Jacob answered.

“Elias! Elias!” was repeated from one end of the banqueting-hall to the other.

In imagination, all fancied that they could see an old man, a flight of ravens above his head, standing before an altar, which a flash of lightning illumined, revealing the idolatrous priests that were thrown into the torrent; and the women, sitting in the galleries, thought of the widow of Sarepta.

Jacob then declared that he knew Elias; that he had seen him, and that many of the guests there assembled had seen him!

“His name!” was the cry from all lips.

“Iaokanann!”

Antipas fell back in his chair as if a heavy blow had struck him on the breast. The Sadducees rose from their seats and rushed towards Jacob. Eleazar raised his voice

to a shout in order to make himself heard. When order was finally restored, he draped his mantle about his shoulders, and, with the air of a judge, proceeded to put questions to Jacob.

“Since the prophet is dead—” he began.

Murmurs interrupted him. Many persons believed that Elias was not dead, but had only disappeared.

Eleazar rebuked those who had interrupted him; and continuing, asked:

“And dost thou believe that he has indeed come to life again?”

“Why should I not believe it?” Jacob replied.

The Sadducees shrugged their shoulders. Jonathas, opening wide his little eyes, gave a forced, buffoon-like laugh. Nothing could be more absurd, said he, than the idea that a human body could have eternal life; and he declaimed, for the benefit of the proconsul, this line from a contemporaneous poet:

Nec crescit, nec post mortem durare videtur.

By this time Aulus was leaning over the side of the pavilion, with pale face, a perspiring brow, and both hands outspread on his stomach.

The Sadducees pretended to be deeply moved at the sight of his suffering, thinking that perhaps the next day the offices of sacrificers would be theirs. Antipas appeared to be in despair at his guest’s agony. Vitellius preserved a calm demeanour, although he felt some anxiety, for the loss of his son would mean the loss of his fortune.

But Aulus, quickly recovering after he had relieved his over-burdened stomach, was as eager to eat as before.

“Let some one bring me marble-dust,” he commanded, “or clay of Naxos, sea-water—anything! Perhaps it would do me good to bathe.”

He swallowed a quantity of snow; then hesitated between a ragout and a dish of blackbirds; and finally decided in favour of gourds served in honey. The little

Asiatic gazed at his master in astonishment and admiration; to him this exhibition of gluttony denoted a wonderful being belonging to a superior race.

The feast went on. Slaves served the guests with kidneys, dormice, nightingales, mince-meat dressed with vine-leaves. The priests discoursed among themselves regarding the supposed resurrection. Ammonius, pupil of Philon, the Platonist, pronounced them stupid, and told the Greeks that he laughed at their oracles.

Marcellus and Jacob were seated side by side. Marcellus described the happiness he had felt under the baptism of Mithra, and Jacob made him promise to become a follower of Jesus.

The wines of the palm and the tamarisk, those of Safed and of Byblos, ran from the amphoras into the crateras, from the crateras into the cups, and from the cups down the guests' throats. Every one talked, all hearts expanding under the good cheer. Jacim, although a Jew, did not hesitate to express his admiration of the planets. A merchant from Aphaka amazed the nomads with his description of the marvels in the temple of Hierapolis; and they wished to know the cost of a pilgrimage to that place. Others held fast to the principles of their native religion. A German, who was nearly blind, sang a hymn celebrating that promontory in Scandinavia where the gods were wont to appear with halos around their heads. The people from Sichem declined to eat turtles, out of deference to the dove Azima.

Several groups stood talking near the middle of the banqueting-hall, and the vapour of their breath, mingled with the smoke from the candles, formed a light mist. Presently Phanuel slipped quietly into the room, keeping close to the wall. He had been out in the open courtyard, to make another survey of the heavens. He stopped when he reached the pavilion of the tetrarch, fearing he would be splashed with drops of oil if he approached the other tables, which, to an Essene, would be a great defilement.

Suddenly violent blows resounded upon the castle gates. The news of the

imprisonment of Iaokanann had spread rapidly, and now it appeared that the whole surrounding population was flocking to the castle. Men with torches were hastening along the roads in all directions; a black mass of people swarmed in the ravine; and from all throats came the cry: “Iaokanann! Iaokanann!”

“That man will ruin everything,” said Jonathas.

“We shall have no more money if this continues,” said the Pharisees.

Accusations, recriminations, and pleadings were heard on all sides.

“Protect us!”

“Compel them to cease!”

“Thou didst abandon thy religion!”

“Impious as all the Herods!”

“Less impious than thou!” Antipas retorted. “Was it not my father that erected thy Temple?”

Then the Pharisees, children of the proscribed tribes, partisans of Mattathias, accused the tetrarch of all the crimes committed by his family.

The Pharisees had pointed skulls, bristling beards, feeble hands, snub noses, great round eyes, and their countenances bore a resemblance to that of a bull-dog. A dozen of these people, scribes and attendants upon the priests, who picked up their living from the refuse of holocausts, rushed to the foot of the pavilion and threatened Antipas with their knives. He attempted to speak to them, being only slightly protected by some of the Sadducees. Suddenly he perceived Mannaeus at a distance and made him a sign to approach. The expression on the face of Vitellius indicated that he regarded all this turmoil as no concern of his.

The Pharisees, leaning against the pavilion, were now beside themselves with demoniac fury. They broke plates and dashed them upon the floor. The attendants had served them with a ragout composed of the flesh of the wild ass, an unclean

animal, and their anger knew no bounds. Aulus rallied them jeeringly apropos of the ass's head, which he declared they honoured. He flung other sarcasms at them, regarding their antipathy to the flesh of swine, intimating that no doubt their hatred arose from the fact that that beast had killed their beloved Bacchus, and saying it was to be feared they were too fond of wine, since a golden vine had been discovered in the Temple.

The priests did not understand his sneers, and Phineas, of Galilean origin, refused to translate them. Aulus suddenly became angry, the more so because the little Asiatic, frightened at the tumult, had disappeared. The feast no longer pleased the noble glutton; the dishes were vulgar, and not sufficiently disguised with delicate flavourings. After a time his displeasure abated, as he caught sight of a dish of Syrian lambs' tails, dressed with spices, a favourite dainty.

To Vitellius the character of the Jews seemed frightful. Their God was like Moloch, several altars to whom he had passed upon his route; and he recalled the stories he had heard of the mysterious Jew who fattened small children and offered them as a sacrifice. His Latin nature was filled with disgust at their intolerance, their iconoclastic rage, their brutal, stumbling bearing. The proconsul wished to depart, but Aulus refused to accompany him.

The exaltation of the people increased. They abandoned themselves to dreams of independence. They recalled the glory of Israel, and a Syrian spoke of all the great conquerors they had vanquished,—Antigone, Crassus, Varus.

"Miserable creatures!" cried the enraged proconsul, who had overheard the Syrian's words.

In the midst of the uproar Antipas remembered the medallion of the emperor that Herodias had given to him; he drew it forth and looked at it a moment, trembling, then held it up with its face turned towards the throng.

At the same moment, the panels of the gold-railed balcony were folded back, and,

accompanied by slaves bearing wax tapers, Herodias appeared, her coiffure crowned with an Assyrian mitre, which was held in place by a band passing under the chin. Her dark hair fell in ringlets over a scarlet peplum with slashed sleeves. On either side of the door through which one stepped into the gallery, stood a huge stone monster, like those of Atrides; and as Herodias appeared between them, she looked like Cybele supported by her lions. In her hands she carried a patera, a shallow vessel of silver used by the Romans in pouring libations; and, advancing to the front of the balcony and pausing just above the tetrarch's chair, she cried:

"Long live Caesar!"

This homage was repeated by Vitellius, Antipas, and the priests.

But now, beginning at the farthest end of the banqueting-hall, a murmur of surprise and admiration swept through the multitude. A beautiful young girl had just entered the apartment, and stood motionless for an instant, while all eyes were turned upon her.

Through a drapery of filmy blue gauze that veiled her head and throat, her arched eyebrows, tiny ears, and ivory-white skin could be distinguished. A scarf of shot-silk fell from her shoulders, and was caught up at the waist by a girdle of fretted silver. Her full trousers, of black silk, were embroidered in a pattern of silver mandragoras, and as she moved forward with indolent grace, her little feet were seen to be shod with slippers made of the feathers of humming-birds.

When she arrived in front of the pavilion she removed her veil. Behold! she seemed to be Herodias herself, as she had appeared in the days of her blooming youth.

Immediately the damsel began to dance before the tetrarch. Her slender feet took dainty steps to the rhythm of a flute and a pair of Indian bells. Her round white arms seemed ever beckoning and striving to entice to her side some youth who was fleeing from her allurements. She appeared to pursue him, with movements light as a butterfly; her whole mien was like that of an inquisitive Psyche, or a floating spirit

that might at any moment dissolve and disappear.

Presently the plaintive notes of the gingras, a small flute of Phoenician origin, replaced the tinkling bells. The attitudes of the dancing nymph now denoted overpowering lassitude. Her bosom heaved with sighs, and her whole being expressed profound languor, although it was not clear whether she sighed for an absent swain or was expiring of love in his embrace. With half-closed eyes and quivering form, she caused mysterious undulations to flow downward over her whole body, like rippling waves, while her face remained impassive and her twinkling feet still moved in their intricate steps.

Vitellius compared her to Mnester, the famous pantomimist. Aulus was overcome with faintness. The tetrarch watched her, lost in a voluptuous reverie, and thought no more of the real Herodias. In fancy he saw her again as she appeared when she had dwelt among the Sadducees. Then the vision faded.

But this beautiful thing before him was no vision. The dancer was Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who for many months her mother had caused to be instructed in dancing, and other arts of pleasing, with the sole idea of bringing her to Machaerus and presenting her to the tetrarch, so that he should fall in love with her fresh young beauty and feminine wiles. The plan had proved successful, it seemed; he was evidently fascinated, and Herodias felt that at last she was sure of retaining her power over him!

And now the graceful dancer appeared transported with the very delirium of love and passion. She danced like the priestesses of India, like the Nubians of the cataracts, or like the Bacchantes of Lydia. She whirled about like a flower blown by the tempest. The jewels in her ears sparkled, her swift movements made the colours of her draperies appear to run into one another. Her arms, her feet, her clothing even, seemed to emit streams of magnetism, that set the spectators’ blood on fire.

Suddenly the thrilling chords of a harp rang through the hall, and the throng burst

into loud acclamations. All eyes were fixed on Salome, who paused in her rhythmic dance, placed her feet wide apart, and without bending the knees, suddenly swayed her lithe body downward, so that her chin touched the floor; and her whole audience,—the nomads, accustomed to a life of privation and abstinence, the Roman soldiers, expert in debaucheries, the avaricious publicans, and even the crabbed, elderly priests—gazed upon her with dilated nostrils.

Next she began to whirl frantically around the table where Antipas the tetrarch was seated. He leaned towards the flying figure, and in a voice half choked with the voluptuous sighs of a mad desire, he sighed: “Come to me! Come!” But she whirled on, while the music of dulcimers swelled louder and the excited spectators roared their applause.

The tetrarch called again, louder than before: “Come to me! Come! Thou shalt have Capernaum, the plains of Tiberias! my citadels! yea, the half of my kingdom!”

Again the dancer paused; then, like a flash, she threw herself upon the palms of her hands, while her feet rose straight up into the air. In this bizarre pose she moved about upon the floor like a gigantic beetle; then stood motionless.

The nape of her neck formed a right angle with her vertebrae. The full silken skirts of pale hues that enveloped her limbs when she stood erect, now fell to her shoulders and surrounded her face like a rainbow. Her lips were tinted a deep crimson, her arched eyebrows were black as jet, her glowing eyes had an almost terrible radiance; and the tiny drops of perspiration on her forehead looked like dew upon white marble.

She made no sound; and the burning gaze of that multitude of men was concentrated upon her.

A sound like the snapping of fingers came from the gallery over the pavilion. Instantly, with one of her movements of bird-like swiftness, Salome stood erect. The next moment she rapidly passed up a flight of steps leading to the gallery, and

coming to the front of it she leaned over, smiled upon the tetrarch, and, with an air of almost childlike naivete, pronounced these words:

“I ask my lord to give me, placed upon a charger, the head of—” She hesitated, as if not certain of the name; then said: “The head of Iaokanann!”

The tetrarch sank back in his chair as if stunned.

He had bound himself by his promise to her; and the people awaited his next movement. But the death that night of some conspicuous man that had been predicted to him by Phanuel,—what if, by bringing it upon another, he could avert it from himself, thought Antipas. If Iaokanann was in very truth the Elias so much talked of, he would have power to protect himself; and if he were only an ordinary man, his murder was of no importance.

Mannaeus stood beside his chair, and read his master’s thoughts. Vitellius beckoned him to his side and gave him an order for the execution, to be transmitted to the soldiers placed on guard over the dungeon. This execution would be a relief, he thought. In a few moments all would be over!

But for once Mannaeus did not perform a commission satisfactorily. He left the hall but soon returned, in a state of great perturbation.

During forty years he had exercised the functions of the public executioner. It was he that had drowned Aristobulus, strangled Alexander, burned Mattathias alive, beheaded Zozimus, Pappus, Josephus, and Antipater; but he dared not kill Iaokanann! His teeth chattered and his whole body trembled.

He declared that he had seen, standing before the dungeon, the Angel of the Samaritans, covered with eyes and brandishing a great sword, glowing and quivering like a flame. He appealed to two of the guards, who had entered the hall with him, to corroborate his words. But they said they had seen nothing except a Jewish captain who had attacked them, and whom they had killed.

The fury of Herodias poured forth in a torrent of invective against the populace. She

clenched the railing of the balcony so fiercely as to break her nails; the two stone lions at her back seemed to bite her shoulders and join their voices to hers.

Antipas followed her example; and priests, soldiers, and Pharisees cried aloud together for vengeance, echoed by the rest of the gathering, who were indignant that a mere slave should dare to delay their pleasures.

Again Mannaeus left the hall, covering his face with his hands.

The guests found the second delay longer than the first. It seemed tedious to every one.

Presently a sound of footsteps was heard in the corridor without; then silence fell again. The suspense was becoming intolerable.

Suddenly the door was flung open and Mannaeus entered, holding at arm's length, grasping it by the hair, the head of Iaokanann. His appearance was greeted with a burst of applause, which filled him with pride and revived his courage.

He placed the head upon a charger and offered it to Salome, who had descended the steps to receive it. She remounted to the balcony, with a light step; and in another moment the charger was carried about from one table to another by the elderly female slave whom the tetrarch had observed in the morning on the balcony of a neighbouring house, and later in the chamber of Herodias.

When she approached him with her ghastly burden, he turned away his head to avoid looking at it. Vitellius threw upon it an indifferent glance.

Mannaeus descended from the pavilion, took the charger from the woman, and exhibited the head to the Roman captains, then to all the guests on that side of the hall.

They looked at it curiously.

The sharp blade of the sword had cut into the jaw with a swift downward stroke. The corners of the mouth were drawn, as if by a convulsion. Clots of blood besprinkled

the beard. The closed eyelids had a shell-like transparency, and the candelabra on every side lighted up the gruesome object with terrible distinctness.

Mannaeus arrived at the table where the priests were seated. One of them turned the charger about curiously, to look at the head from all sides. Then Mannaeus, having entirely regained his courage, placed the charger before Aulus, who had just awakened from a short doze; and finally he brought it again to Antipas and set it down upon the table beside him. Tears were running down the cheeks of the tetrarch.

The lights began to flicker and die out. The guests departed, and at last no one remained in the great hall save Antipas, who sat leaning his head upon his hands, gazing at the head of Iaokanann; and Phanuel, who stood in the centre of the largest nave and prayed aloud, with uplifted arms.

At sunrise the two men who had been sent on a mission by Iaokanann some time before, returned to the castle, bringing the answer so long awaited and hoped for.

They whispered the message to Phanuel, who received it with rapture.

Then he showed them the lugubrious object, still resting on the charger amid the ruins of the feast. One of the men said:

“Be comforted! He has descended among the dead in order to announce the coming of the Christ!”

And in that moment the Essene comprehended the words of Iaokanann: “In order that His glory may increase, mine must diminish!”

Then the three, taking with them the head of John the Baptist, set out upon the road to Galilee; and as the burden was heavy, each man bore it awhile in turn.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HERODIAS ***

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