

ESTHER

I. Introduction

Beauty that shines in the face alone,
Not long may sit on a queenly throne;
For beauty of heart in the life must be seen
Before there can be a beautiful queen.

The scene is laid in Shushan (Susa), some 250 miles east of the city of Babylon and 75 miles east of the Tigris river, and 130 miles north of the Persian Gulf. King Ahasuerus (Xerxes, B.C. 485-465), was king of Persia and reigned at this time over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, extending from India to Ethiopia. It will be recalled that Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had carried away from Jerusalem, Jeconiah (Jehoiakin) the King of Judah, together with a number of Jewish captives, which at this time would seem to have been widely scattered throughout the domain of the Persian empire. The time was about four centuries B.C. The heroine of the story is Esther, one of the Jewish exiles, who rises from one of the most humble walks of life to become a queen, and thereby ultimately rescuing her people from wholesale destruction, planned by Haman, the favorite courtier of the king. One must take into account the circumstances of her life and the conditions of her time.

II. Ahasuerus' Feast and the Rejection of Queen Vashti

King Ahasuerus, in the third year of his reign at Shushan, one of his capitals, held a banquet or feast for a period of 180 days for the chief personages of his kingdom. Then followed seven days additional feast, open to all people at that time in Shushan. Queen Vashti invited the women to a similar banquet in the royal house. The king's magnificent palace, with its richly colored furnishings and equipment is almost beyond description. On the seventh and last day of the feast, the King commands Queen Vashti to be brought to the feast, bidding her to display her charms to the Persian courtiers around him. She absolutely refuses

to obey the order of the king. The king, heated with wine to the disgusting degradation of drunkenness, grossly insults the queen; besides, it would seem to have outraged the most sacred rules of Oriental etiquette. Moreover, the rigid laws of the Persians did not permit strangers to look upon wives, with faces uncovered.. This seculsion was to be violated for the amusement of the dissolute king's company. A second time she is sent for and refuses to obey the king's command, given in the presence of the dignitaries of the empire, whereupon at the instigation of his counselors, or viziers, he deposes Vashti from the rank of queen, publishing the edict stating that every man should be master of his own house.

"For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes when it shall be reported. The King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought before him, but she came not."

The king's weakness is certainly despicable. His conduct toward Vashti was not only insulting, but it was ungrateful. It was a drunken order, but the words when once decreed were irrevocable. The king had no recourse. The order stated "that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus." Josephus says that the king loved Vashti tenderly and bitterly lamented her loss. How well to the point is the statement of Shakespeare, "Oh, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains." The worst effect of this vice of drunkenness is its degrading influence on the character and conduct of people. It robs one of self-respect. There is much discussion among the biblical writers as to whether Xerxes was justified in putting Vashti away. Of Vashti it has been said: "She nurses no revenge and feels no jealousy, but saves the life of the man who had cast her aside."

III. Esther Chosen Queen

When the wrath of the king had subsided, he felt deeply the loss of Vashti. His courtiers, cognizant of the king's depression, advise him to assemble at Susa the most beautiful maidens from all the provinces in

order that he may select another queen. The king agrees to this suggestion. The maidens are assembled, among whom was Esther, an orphan, who had been reared by her cousin, Mordecai. After twelve months of beautification, all the maidens were brought before the king. Ahasuerus chose Esther as the most beautiful of all the women. "And the king loved Esther above all women." In due time she was crowned queen with appropriate royal ceremonies and festivities. This was in the seventh year of Ahasuerus' reign and four years after Vashti had been dethroned. Esther is one of the outstanding heroines of the Bible—strong, brave, capable, patriotic and honorable. The splendor and beauty of her life is this—that she does not succumb to the luxury and temptation of her surroundings and is not spoiled by being a queen. She was a woman of the highest integrity and principles; a shining example of female virtue. The king was a good husband to her, highly valued her virtues and yielded to her influence and example. She was gentle, elegant, and beautiful.

IV. Plot to Assassinate the King Discovered by Mordecai

The history of Mordecai shows him to have been a good and virtuous man with a true parental, zealous and abiding interest in the welfare and success of his cousin, Esther. He was a Jew of the captivity—a Benjamite. Mordecai is recorded as daily sitting at the king's gate, making inquiry concerning Esther in order that he might render her any assistance or service possible. On the other hand, Esther is recorded as "doing the commandment of Mordecai like as when she was brought up with him." It was he who discovered a conspiracy on the part of two of the king's chamberlains against the life of the king. Presumably they guarded the entrance to the king's private apartments and were the most trusted watchmen. Mordecai made known the same to Esther, who in turn told the king. An inquisition followed, whereupon Bigthan and Teresh, the two conspirators were hanged on a tree. Although the deed is recorded in the

royal annals, yet Mordecai, for his act of courage and loyalty, inadvertently was left unrewarded by Ahasuerus. He, however, was content with having done his duty.

V. Haman Promoted

The next link of the story is the elevation or promotion of Haman to the office of grand vizier, that is, he was chief over all his nobles and commanded everyone to do obeisance to him. He became a sort of arch-enemy to the Jews. He was a man of most inordinate vanity. His every action is saturated with an absorbing spirit of vanity. He is chagrined when the humblest servant does not do homage to him as to the king. "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth" when fanned by the breath of vanity. He has no sympathy with sufferers, and is ready to trample anyone underfoot at the slightest provocation. Vanity leads to cruelty. If a single obscure individual opposed him or refused to obey him, a shadow rested on everything. After he had attended the queen's banquet, he passed by the gate where Mordecai was seated, "Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai, the Jew, sitting at the king's gate."

VI. Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews

On no occasion and under no circumstances would Mordecai do homage to Haman as he passed in and out of the gate of the temple. The edict did not humble Mordecai in the least. His refusal to bow down to Haman is quite inexplicable. Haman's offended pride scorns the idea of a single vengeance on Mordecai, so he lays a deep plot for the destruction of all the Jewish people of the empire, whom he describes to the king as disloyal and worthless. The refusal of Mordecai to bow down to Haman, unreasonable as it was, served his purpose.

Haman's statement to Ahasuerus concerning the Jews is "that their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's

laws; therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them." They were represented as a dangerous people, corrupting his subjects and undermining the government. Continuing he said: "If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries." He thus bribes the king to obtain royal consent to his deadly design. The king took off the ring, which was used as a seal, and gave it to Haman adding: "The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee." The king grants Haman a free hand. The murderous mandate goes forth and the day for the wholesale slaughter of the Jews was set upon the 13th day of the twelvemonth of Adar, "to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, on one day." Thus far everything has progressed on a large scale. The guarantee of 10,000 talents from the spoils of the Jews, it is stated, secured the consent more readily of the king. A talent at that time was worth about 360 pounds. The 10,000 talents promised were worth thus about \$18,000,000.

VII. Queen Esther Goes to the King

Haman is an example of one who "falls into his own pit," or of the villain who is "hoisted on his own petard." When Mordecai learned of the edict, he rent his clothes, putting on sackcloth with ashes. He called upon Esther to go before the king to intervene and save her people. She answered that her own life would be at stake if she appeared before the king unless summoned. But Mordecai replies that she herself cannot escape the edict. She finally decides to do as Mordecai directed. After three days fast within and without the palace, she put on her royal apparel. "I'll go," said Esther. "If I perish, I perish." These words are a flavor of her fine courage. The king, seated on his royal throne, graciously receives Esther and extends to her the scepter which she touches, and

said: "What wilt thou, Queen Esther, and what is thy request? It shall be given to thee even to the half of the kingdom." She makes answer by inviting the king and Haman to a banquet which she had prepared this same day.

VIII. The King and Haman Banquet with Esther

The banquet was held as planned. The king repeats in the presence of Haman, the promise previously made to Esther. Whereupon Esther replies, "If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, to to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I have prepared for them."

IX. Happenings Before the Next Banquet

Haman's vanity gets the best of him again, because he alone was asked to sup with the king at Esther's banquet of wine. The moment he saw Mordecai he became incensed at his insolence and lays a plot to have him immediately hanged. If only Mordecai could be gotten out of the way before the banquet, he could enjoy himself. So he causes to be erected a gallows fifty cubits (83 feet) in height. But before carrying out this heinous crime, it would seem that Haman must have the assent of the king.

During the intervening night following the banquet of Esther, Ahasurus has a sleepless night, and causes the book of records of chronicles to be read to him, whereupon he finds that Mordecai had not been rewarded for saving his life. Early that morning Haman came to the royal palace to demand of the king Mordecai's execution. The king learning of the presence of Haman at the outward court of his house sent for him, and in a word blights Haman's hopes. The king said to Haman: "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor?" Haman flattered himself that the king had him in mind. His lack of suspicion makes the blow, which is to follow, all the more crushing. He replied thus:

"For the man whom the king delighteth to honor, let royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and on the head of which a crown royal is set: and let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble

princes, that he may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honor, and cause him to ride on horseback through the streets of the city, and proclaim before him. Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor. Then the king said to Haman, "Make haste and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai, the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate; let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken."

The king's order was obeyed. Haman dared not disobey. What a trial it must have been to Haman! The expected triumph of Haman resulted in his humiliation, in his escorting the hated enemy as the king's favorite through the streets.

The Second Banquet—The Fall of Haman

The day and hour for the second banquet was at hand. The king a third time reiterates his statement to Esther. She had put the king off twice. It was the psychological moment for Esther, and she struck while the iron was hot. With great tact she began pleading for her own life. She hits out from the shoulder, stating the distressing sufferings of her people, and accuses Haman of planning the massacre of the innocent Jews. She said to the king:

"If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my peace, although the adversary could not have compensated for the king's damage. Then spake the king Ahasuerus and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart so to do? And Esther said, An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen. And the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden.

Haman suddenly discovers that he had aggravated the rage of the zealous king, first by condemning Vashti and now by trying to destroy Esther the Queen, and her people. Haman sued in the meanest measure for his life. Esther pushed her advantage to a bloodthirsty revenge. The king's wrath burst forth anew, and he ordered that Haman be instantly hanged on the scaffold that he had prepared for Mordecai. What a picture of a wretched and corrupt being. Haman—shameless, guilty, and rebellious—was given no opportunity to justify himself. And there was no justification.

XI. Mordecai Promoted—Deliverance of the Jews

Now Esther discloses for the first time her relationship to Mordecai. It is extraordinary that the king had remained ignorant of the fact up to

this time. Mordecai is installed in the place of Haman, and given full power and the signet ring. Although the day for the slaughtering of the Jews was nearly a year away, Esther goes again unsummoned before the king, and is favorably received. She appeals to her national pride, however, rather than to her religion. She addresses the king in the sense of her personal danger, and begs for a reversal of the king's edict. Her request is granted and permission to counteract Haman's edict is granted. The Jews are permitted to gather throughout the entire Persian empire, "to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women." Mordecai sends out a message to counteract the law. As has already been stated he could not revoke or countermand the mandate that had been issued. An opportunity, however, is given the Jews to defend themselves. On the day that had been set for their destruction, there were slain of their enemy 75,000, including the ten sons of Haman who were hanged on the scaffold. No spoils, however, were taken. It would seem that this indiscriminate massacre was a savage act of retaliation that far exceeded the necessity of self-defense, yet on the other hand the danger was supreme, and the Jews were in great minority. A desperate case often requires desperate remedies.

XII. The Feast of Purim

The annual feast of Purim celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from a fearful danger and symbolizes the triumph of the Church of Christ over her fiercest foes. It is observed on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar. The feast is observed with shouts, hand-clasping, and the reading of the story. The custom of sending gifts, usually sweetmeats, to one another is still observed. The feast comes in early spring, a month before the Passover. "The attitude of Esther and Mordecai," says Dr. Streane, "toward the whole question of permissibility of revenge was naturally that of their contemporaries, and so it is not to be judged by us on Christian

principles." Esther had many charming qualities. She risked her life for her people, and won a great deliverance which God used as an instrument for working out a glorious purpose.

The entire story of Esther leaves a deep impression on us of the far seeing wisdom and enduring providence of Jehovah. All the events or episodes, wrought together brought about the result appointed in the determinate counsel and purpose of the God of Israel.