

THE WIFE AND THE ROYAL ARCH MASON

With the gorgeous pageantry of the royal court of Persia, the atmosphere heavy with oriental perfumes and on every side the sound of revelry and banqueting, Ahasuerus, the most influential monarch of all the East, was entertaining the nobles and princes of his realm. For many days the royal palace with its courts and gardens was decorated with white, green and blue hangings which were fastened by silver rings to pillars of marble. At intervals throughout the garden were placed couches of gold and silver upon a pavement of many colored marble, that those who grew weary might recline until rested. Wine was served in vessels of gold, and rich viands were furnished in abundance.

Near the close of this "feast of days" the King, as if having reserved the most beautiful spectacle until the last, sent and requested the presence of Queen Vashti, that he might show the princes and people the beauty of their Queen, for she was exceedingly fair to look upon. Without one word of explanation the statement is made, "The Queen Vashti refused to come at the King's commandment."

Theologians and commentators have written many pages in extenuation of Vashti's conduct. Some have lauded her behavior, declaring that according to oriental custom it would have been immodest for her to have appeared before the King and his courtiers without having her face covered with a veil. A noted American divine has stated that the King and his nobles were beastly drunk and had the Queen complied with his maudlin request, the very men who in their intoxication demanded that she come, in their sober moments would have despised her.

The text, however, gives no proof that the King was drunk; on the contrary, he seems to have had perfect control over his faculties; and certainly he exercised judgment and discretion in his dealings with the Queen. He made no attempt to compel her to obey his request, but referred the matter to the wise men, those versed in the laws of the Medes and the Persians, and requested them to determine the penalty which should be inflicted upon Vashti, according to law. After weighing the matter well, they agreed that the injury was not a personal one to the King only, inasmuch as other women, hearing of the Queen's conduct, would refuse to respect their husbands; the penalty assigned

was that Vashti come no more before the King and that her royal estate be given to another that is better than she. So Vashti passed out the palace gates a divorced woman, and search was made throughout the empire for someone who should be her successor.

Now there was in Shushan a certain Jew who had been carried away from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and his name was Mordecai. He had brought up Esther, his uncle's daughter, for her father and mother were dead, and he had raised her as his own daughter. When all the young maidens that were fair and beautiful were brought into the King's house, Esther was also brought in among them. "And the King loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown upon her head and made her Queen instead of Vashti." Esther's coronation took place 4 years after Vashti was deposed; during all the months in which she had waited her turn to be presented to the King, her uncle's custom had been to walk by the palace gates and inquire as to how she fared, and he continued the same practice after she was made Queen.

From this juncture in our story the commanding presence of Mordecai assumes more and more importance - notice him well, my brothers, for he carries about him the bearing of a Royal Arch Mason. Up to this time he has played a subordinate part in this oriental drama, but his quiet dignity and innate superiority forces him into notice.

Another prominent character now comes upon the stage of action - Haman, the Agagite, by some unrecorded method insinuated himself into the King's favor, and was promoted above all the princes and made prime minister of the realm. This high official, though clad in princely robes, and riding a richly caparisoned horse, and carrying himself with a haughty mien, was the very opposite of Mordecai; indeed, he belonged to that class of men known to the Masonic fraternity as profanes. Like all persons of inferior mental and moral endowments, he was inflated with pride by his sudden elevation, and arrogantly exacted every obeisance due his exalted station. The palace servants, in obedience to the King's command, bowed the knee before him and showed him reverence.

Mordecai was often brought face to face with the Prince Haman at the King's gate, but he neither bowed nor did him reverence.

The fortunes of war had rendered the noble Jew a captive at the court of a foreign

nation, and though dependant for sustenance on the bounty of his conquerors, he was no hypocritical sycophant, fawning upon the King's favorite, and seeking notice from one whom he knew to be his inferior.

Haman seems to have been so inflated with pride by his own newly ^{acquired greatness} ~~ambition~~ that he failed to notice the lack of obeisance on the Jew's part until his attention was called to it by his servants. Then he was greatly incensed and his low, mean nature prompted him to lay plans for revenge.

Now Mordecai had made known the very thing which he had charged Esther to keep secret; namely, his race and people. Then Haman, hearing that Mordecai was of the Jews, was not willing to wreak vengeance on him alone, but resolved to put all the Jews in the empire to death. By soft address and flattering insinuations, he readily obtained the King's consent, and had the death warrant of all the Jews in the entire Persian empire signed by the King and sealed with the King's own signet. And the edict was published throughout the empire.

Mordecai clothed himself with sackcloth and ashes and came near the King's gate, whereupon the Queen sent to inquire the cause of his mourning; he returned her word of the evil which had been determined against them, and commanded her to make supplication of the King for their lives.

Esther had been accustomed to obey her uncle from her childhood up, and was still unwilling to displease him, but now she had formed other ties and with them other duties, and it was a painful thought to obtrude herself upon her royal husband while he was in the council chamber busy with the affairs of State, especially when he had not requested her presence.

It is easy for us to believe that Ahasuerus possessed the entire affection of the young Queen. Why should she not love the man who had preferred her above all women? Who during the 5 years which had passed since she was made Queen, had proven himself an indulgent King, a generous husband and a kind friend and companion. Where is the woman who would not shrink from offending one whom she loved and who loved her? But aside from the fear of incurring his displeasure, a chill of terror smote her heart when she remembered the dread penalty should the King fail to extend to her the golden scepter.

Was it in order to give time for thought that she returned her first answer, or did the young Queen think that the man who was so well versed in wisdom's ways, and possessed of such an intimate knowledge of men and affairs, could surely devise some other plan of action? Her message was carefully dictated, she didn't send a blunt rejoinder, "You know the penalty is death!" But very gently did she suggest, "All the King's servants, and the people of the King's province do know, that death is inflicted upon all who enter the inner court unbidden except those to whom the golden scepter is extended."

The gentlest natures are often the sternest when duty requires it. The man who has filled a father's place to her found it necessary to return a message whose words were like a lash. "Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the King's house more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed." Then as if seeking to impart courage, he added, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

She hesitated no longer. Very simple and touching were the preparations she made. Remembering that "he that humbleth himself shall be exalted," she asked that Mordecai and all the Jews in the city would fast for 3 days and nights, neither eat nor drink, and declared that she and her maidens would fast likewise, closing her message with the sublime words, "So will I go unto the King, which is not according to law, and if I perish, I perish!"

Truly, "the King's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water, and He turneth it whither so ever He will." Ahasuerus extended the golden scepter at once and offered to grant her petition to the half of the kingdom.

Esther was a wise little woman; she had no intention of asking a favor of her liege lord while he was tired and hungry, so she shrewdly requested the presence of the King and the prime minister, Haman, at a banquet which she had prepared for them. Haman was hastily summoned and he and the King repaired to the place of banquet.

Again the King offered to grant her petition, but she asked that he and Haman might be present at another banquet on the following day, and promised to make her request known at that time. She evidently went on the principle that if one good dinner would put the King

in a pleasant frame of mind, 2 would render him very amiable indeed!

Haman came from the Queen's presence highly elated at the honors shown him, but was thrown into a paroxysm of rage on passing out the King's gate because Mordecai, the Jew, neither arose up nor stood aside for him. He basely resolved to rid himself at once of the one whose character was a constant rebuke to his own, so he had a gallows erected for his execution, and went at once to obtain the King's consent. But Mordecai - what of him? We find him still sitting at the King's gate, serene, calm in the assurance of his own integrity. Such a man too exalted in character to entertain aught of envy or revenge, he valued Haman at his true worth, but he feared him not.

On the following day Esther made known her request unto the King. He demanded ~~of~~ the name of the guilty party, and received the prompt answer: "This wicked Haman."

Ahasuerus seems to have been a poor observer of men, at least not readily discerning their true character; but be it said to his credit, he believed the Queen implicitly and had Haman hanged at once upon the gallows which Haman had builded for Mordecai. Then he resolutely set to work to repair the mischief which Haman had done. He granted the Jews permission to stand for their lives, and they conquered their enemies and had light and joy and gladness.

The King promoted Mordecai to the position of prime minister, and showed him honor and made him his own trusted counselor. One day under sentence of death, clothed in sackcloth and ashes at the King's gate; the next, arrayed in royal robes and second in power to the King. Yet Mordecai was as great before as after his elevation, for true greatness is an inward possession and not dependent on exterior accessories.

With Ahasuerus as monarch, and Mordecai premier of Persia, history drops the curtain. But may we not imagine the King inquiring into the Unseen Influence which ruled Mordecai's life; if so, we may be sure he pointed him to the "Source of all wisdom - the Source of all light."

My Sisters, whether as daughter, mother, wife or sister, let us avoid the course of Vashti and emulate the example of Esther. Contrast then a moment. Vashti, thinking only of self, and dictatorial even to her royal husband. Esther with a firm trust in the Most High God, practicing self-abnegation and seeking only to be Queen of her husband's heart

and home; yet withal still loving her own people so truly that she forms the link that binds the 2 families together.

First of all, commit your way unto the keeping of an All-Wise Father, for it takes great grace to live pleasantly with some people. If a 3 days' fast is necessary, try it - but don't forget the effect of a couple of good dinners. And may the peace that passeth understanding, and the companionship of the Holy One of Israel be your daily portion.