

Esther Star of Israel

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Esther...

★ Star of Israel

SLIM FINGERS holding the golden mirror trembled, so that it made a sharp clatter in the marble niche among the gilded pots of carmine and black kohl.

From the wide terrace of the King's Court far below, the thin cry of trumpets rose in an exultant burst of sound, heralding the entrance of some Eastern prince and his retinue. The muffled sound of many sandaled bearers hinted the new arrival's importance.

Esther, Queen of Persia, arose from the golden bench, and she leaned heavily on her rigid arms, gripping the edge of the alcove. Her mouth, newly carmined, blazed in the taut pallor of her face, and the head that wore the jeweled crown lifted to the high eastern window of the room.

"Oh God of our Fathers," she prayed, her voice low and strained in the quiet room, "how are Thy people brought low, and the wicked are exalted over them. Oh, my Lord, Thou only art our King. Help me, desolate woman which have no help but Thee, for my danger is in my hand."

As she turned to the doorway, her gown swung from her body, and the heavy encrustment of jewels upon it blazed in the shaft of light pouring from the window, and set the crown of Esther ablaze with a thousand darting colors that reflected and danced for a moment on the shining marble walls before the woman passed out of the room.

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Mordecai, son of Jair of the Tribe of Benjamin, had suffered much. Mother and father, uncle and aunt and other kindred had he seen slain pitifully in Jerusalem, for he was one of the unhappy captives of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, and now he dwelt in Shushan, palace of King Ahasuerus, Ruler of Persia.

Now it so happened that Mordecai was faithful to the God of his Fathers, though the name of his God was silenced among his people in this foreign land. Worship, too, was a hidden thing, held in the hearts of the scattered Children of Israel, finding no voice. The old Mosaic forms of worship were half forgotten and the glorious history of the Race was unsung.

The people of Persia worshipped, instead of the true God, the Elements, so that they even forebore to bury their dead. The earth was a god and must not be defiled by decaying bodies. Water, too, must not bear defilement, nor might

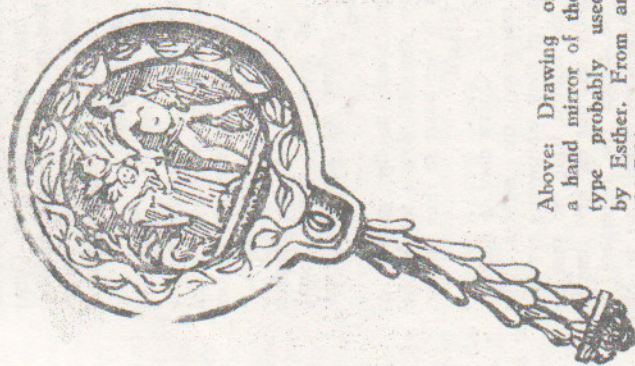
the dead be burned, since the Fire God might not be so dishonored. In the end, the very air--also God of the people of Persia--was defiled but briefly by the Towers of the Dead, reaching into the sky at the edge of the plain. Here were the bodies of the dead laid, and carrion birds completed the unlovely work of disposing of Persian and captive dead.

The laws of the Hebrew faith that commanded burial or entombment of the dead could not be obeyed in this bitter land. Those who buried a loved one instead of observing the Persian form of disposal earned instant death and the very horror they dreaded.

In this alien land, then, was Mordecai the guardian of his young cousin, Hadasah, whose father and mother had met death in Jerusalem. In his care, she grew, and the maid waxed fair and beautiful.

Now it came about that the King, whose very power sated him with all things, became bored and restless at the uneventful course of his rule. Princes came to pay him homage. The fairest maidens of the Kingdom dwelt in the House of Women in the palace of the king. So far as the shores of civilization reached, his power was felt and he was honored as a ruler most powerful in all the known world.

Thus it was that in the council chambers, hung with the royal white, green and



Above: Drawing of a hand mirror of the type probably used by Esther. From an old Bible.

blue hangings, the princes and Eastern potentates lay, each upon his couch of gold and silver, and before them upon the pavement of red and blue and black and white marble danced the loveliest maidens of the royal household. Other maidens waited the royal fans, and slaves moved here and there among the guests, offering fruit and royal wine in abundance from vessels of pure gold.

Now on the seventh day when the heart of the King beat faster, because of much wine, he commanded his seven chamberlains to bring before him Queen Vashti, for she was fair to look upon.

"Instruct her," he said in drunken pomposity, "to wear the crown royal, and to come before me and this company unveiled."

So another block in the pattern of man's history was laid down, for Vashti found it not in her heart to thus appear, and so she refused.

How would the Queen dare to go defy the King! whispered the princes. The sibilant sound of their whispering reached the ears of the flouted King, so that he burned inwardly, and for the first time in his Royal life tasted the bitterness of humiliation. Ahasuerus raged thus to his Wise Men: "What shall we do unto Queen Vashti who has not performed my commandment?"

And Memucan, the Wise, answered, for he too, was a married man and he

feared that others might know that his wife obeyed him not. So he said: "Queen Vashti hath not done wrong to the King only, but also to all the princes and people of the provinces, for this deed of the Queen shall go abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands, and thus shalt there arise contempt and wrath."

And so drunken royalty decreed that "All the wives shall give to their husbands honor, both great and small, and every man shall bear rule in his own house."

Thus was Queen Vashti retired to the House of Women and was no longer queen. And the people of the palace murmured among themselves, saying: "See how great was the love of the King for Queen Vashti that she yet lives and dies not by the command of the King."

And now throughout the vast reaches of the Persian Empire began the great search, for the King's decree went out that the most beautiful woman would be made queen. Hundreds of damsels were brought into the Keeper of the Women whose name was Hegai, and all day long for the period of an entire year the ritual of purification was observed. Six months were the damsels laved with oil of myrrh and six months with sweet odours, and initiated into the mysteries of oriental allurements.

Among these damsels was the lovely

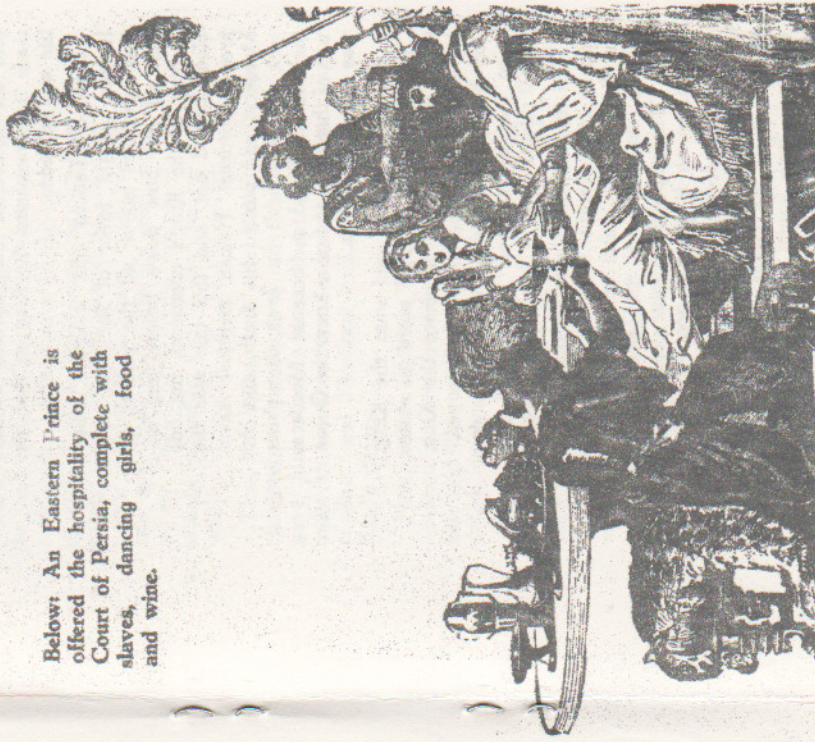
cousin of Mordecai, but her name was no longer "Hadassah," but had now become "Esther", which is to say in the Persian tongue "Evening Star". And Esther revealed not her line nor her people, for Mordecai had charged her that she not show it. So the maiden, Hadassah, disappeared from the household of Mordecai and from the loved friends of her race, and oft she wept in bitter loneliness, and was not solaced by the thought that the King's favor might rest upon her.

Outside in the courtyard of the palace, Mordecai walked every day before the House of Women that he might learn of the outer guard how Esther did and what should become of her.

And now did Esther enter into the King's house, and the Star obtained favor, and the King loved Esther above all women, so that he set the crown upon her head and made her Queen instead of Vashti.

Now faithful Mordecai held in his heart concern for the welfare of his cousin, and so went oft to the King's gate and sat therein that he might listen for word of Esther. It was here he sat and heard Bigthan and Teresh, two of the King's chamberlains, plot against the life of the King. Mordecai sent word unto Esther, the Queen, saying, "Send me raiment befitting a guest of the King that I may enter the apartments of the King's favorite."

Below: An Eastern Prince is offered the hospitality of the Court of Persia, complete with slaves, dancing girls, food and wine.



When Mordecai had come and sat in the Courtyard of the Women's House, he told the Queen of the plot and Esther made it known unto the King so that his life was spared.

Now it chanced that a man, called Haman, sought favor of the King and was advanced above all the princes so that all did bow down before him according to the King's command, but one alone bowed not, and this one was the proud Mordecai. Haman therefore hated Mordecai and plotted his death, and did seek to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole Kingdom, because Mordecai was of that race, and none knew the Queen was also one of them.

And now Haman said unto the King: "It is not for the King's profit to suffer these people, and if it please the King, let it be written that they be destroyed," and here Haman added artfully, playing upon the King's greed, "and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into your treasury."

The trustful King, believing that Haman upheld his interests, took his seal from the finger of his hand and gave it unto Haman, the enemy of the Jews, and he said: "These people I give thee to do with them as it seemeth good to thee."

Thus the decree of death, sealed with the King's seal, went out over the whole land, and in the places where gathered the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, there was sorrow and

crying. And the elders rent their clothes, and put on sackcloth and ashes.

Now Mordecai, thinking in his heart he had naught else to lose, entered the King's gate, clothed thus in the garments of grief. Because it was not permitted to enter the palace thus garmented, shocked palace attendants (perhaps even one or two who knew of Mordecai's relationship to the Queen) did inform Esther of the strange garments, and of the weeping and wailing about the City of the palace.

Then did Esther call unto Hatach the chamberlain appointed to serve her, and gave him commandment that Mordecai make known unto him the reason for his conduct, and Mordecai told him of the King's decree.

Now on this night the King's sleep was troubled so that he lay now upon this side and now upon that, but no pleasant dream came to bring him rest.

Now the King called, therefore, for the book of records of his reign, and they were opened at a certain place and they were read before the King, and this was found written — that Mordecai had saved the life of the King from death at the hands of the two traitorous chamberlains.

And the King said: "What honor and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?" and the King's servant shook his head and said: "None, my Lord."

And so the King slept.

Now on the morrow did Mordecai enter again the palace garden, wearing sackcloth and pouring ashes upon his head, and now and again uttering the loud and bitter cry of mourning.

So Esther's maids and chamberlains told her of this so that she was grieved and she sent him glorious raiment, but he received it not, and Esther sent word to Mordecai, saying: "None may go unto the King's Court under penalty of death but whom the King shall hold out the golden sceptre, and I have not been called to come unto the King these thirty days."

Then Mordecai answered and said "Say unto the Queen, 'Think not that thou thyself shall escape in the King's house more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall our deliverance arise from another place, but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed.'"

Here Mordecai paused and stretched forth his hand toward the messenger, Hatach, his finger pointing emphasis, and he said: "Speak unto Esther, the Queen, and say these words: 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?'"

And Esther's reply showed her acceptance, because she said: "Fast ye with me and all the Jews in Shushan, for I shall

neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day, and my maidens also. And so will I go in unto the King which is not according to the law." And here she added quietly: "... and if I perish, I perish."

So Esther, the Queen, passed into the long corridor that would lead her to the King, and the dim vault of the ceiling echoed the measured tread of her sandals. Her quick breath, too, rustled in the stillness. Once she half turned to fly back to the sweet luxury and security of her apartments, for the King's voice had risen in an angry bellow, followed by the stir of rapid movement and a human cry of despair.

Almost could Esther see the doomed face of the luckless one who had roused the King's anger. But the sharp command of memory prodded her with the words of Mordecai: "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?" And her feet turned again to the King's Court.

Entering now the approach to the Council Chamber, Esther startled the armored guards, for they had received no word from the King that she was to be admitted.

Esther continued her advance toward them, saying as she approached: "I am the Queen." The puzzled guards lowered their spears and neither could comprehend the compelling influence of the Queen's glance.

Now Esther entered the King's Court and moved through the hosts of officials and princes gathered there. Eastward sat the King, couched in an immense chair of gold inlaid with ivory and precious jewels, and before him a stool, likewise of jeweled gold and ivory, for his feet.

The merry-making of the princes and officials hushed as Esther entered the room, so that the King glanced downward in astonishment.

Esther was no longer conscious of those about her, nor was she aware of the mechanical tread of her feet. She saw only the King, radiant in power and majesty, whom she must address. He looked upon her now, and his countenance darkened, but she approached yet nearer, lifting her face to the King, and she spoke not a word. And yet she artfully contrived to remind him of a promise he made to her when she became his Queen.

And now the King's face softened, as he looked upon the beauty of Queen Esther and tasted the sweetness of the pride and humility that played upon her face, both at once, and his heart was softened so that he extended to her the golden sceptre that symbolized his favor. And the King spoke, his voice warm and almost tender as though no one else were near, and he said: "What wilt thou, Queen Esther, and what is thy request? It shall be even given thee to the half of the Kingdom."

And so Esther placed her hand upon the sceptre and knew that she had saved her people.

Now it came to pass on the morrow that Haman was come into the outward Court of the King's house, for he had prepared a gallows and all he now required was permission of the King to hang Mordecai thereon.

And the King's servants said unto him: "Behold Haman standeth in the Court," and the King answered and said: "Let him enter."

Now the King said unto Haman: "What shall be done unto the man, whom the King delighteth to honor?"

Now Haman thought in his heart: "Who would the King delight to honor more than myself?"

And so Haman answered and said: "Let the royal apparel be brought which the King hath worn and thy horse and the crown royal which is set upon his head, and let this, apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the King's most noble princes so that they may array the man with all whom the King delighteth to honor, and let him be brought on horseback through the streets of the City, and proclaim honor before him. Thus should be done to the man whom the King delighteth to honor."

The King nodded approval and spoke, "Make haste," he said, "and take the ap-

parel and the horse, as thou hast said,
and do even so unto Mordecai, the Jew
that sitteth at the King's gate. Let nothing
fail of all that thou hast spoken."

And so it fell to Haman the treacherous
favorite, to lead the hated Jew through
the streets of Shushan, walking before
him, declaring in a loud voice the King's
delight in Mordecai.

And so Mordecai came again to the
King's gate in honor and power. But
Haman hastened to his house, mourning and
having his head covered, and bowed down.

Thus was delivered the chosen race, the
children of Abraham, and of Isaac and of
Jacob, and the name of Esther was made
great among all people, for so long as
time shall endure.

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Freeman, Minneapolis, Minn.
July 8, 1960.