

the Sacred Tongue: the language of religion of all time. Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the Moral Law is written on the Tablets of Eternity. For every false word or unrighteous deed, for every cruelty and oppression, for lust or vanity, the price has to be paid at last, . . . not always by the chief offenders, but paid by someone. Justice and truth alone endure and live. Injustice and falsehood may be long-lived, but doomsday comes at last to them."

CHAPTER III

Nechemiah

"Nechemiah!"

It was his wife calling. It startled him. His mind was troubled. She has become the taskmaster of his emotions and thoughts. He must think of her, for he loved her well in his own way; but they weren't pleasant thoughts, for she was suffering. One doesn't think of one apart from you if one is a part of you, as his wife, or the Almighty. The thinking wells up in you from your inner being as if it were part and parcel of your own very self. But his wife now has pain and suffering which he has not, therefore that part of her is not a part of him, and he has to think of her as a part separate from him. And that is painful and a burden.

"Nechemiah," he heard his name again. There was a light tremor in her voice. It was painful, painful, but he went into her bedroom.

There was faint daylight, semitranslucence of early dawn, as if a curtain were drawn over his eyes. Were his eyes blurry and veiled with tears! He had never shown weakness before great audiences whom he

had stirred to the root and depth of pathos. It was always the voice of the Almighty speaking through his frail body. He looked at her now, pale of face, stretched in her bed, light convulsive seizures passing over her. She was trying to suppress her pain even then in his presence, even smile with lips blanched in tightness. A tragic smile. She looked more beautiful than ever to him - in a spiritual way. He thought of God's pronounced judgment: "And in pain shalt thou bring forth children," and he felt humbled. But she was carrying out His command and therefore He must watch over her....

"Nechemiah," she made a third brave attempt. With strained voice she continued, "God willing I shall live and carry through..." Was it labor pain, or the thought of dying and leaving an orphaned infant and a widowed husband! He read fear in her starting eyes, in which an unearthly luminosity gleamed. No, no, it mustn't be, he said to himself aloud. Her voice came again weaker: "If God wishes..." He must intercede at once with Him for her, who was his by the holy rites of matrimony... And in the immediacy of that moment, which might have been centuries, he knew that his petition direct to His throne had been received and granted. Yes, he was the commander ~~here~~ on here, Earth, and even the Almighty must bend to his wish. He had directed that no evil come to his wife, Esther, from Satan and his brood; that Archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Ariel, stand guard over her. And now that he was in full command of the heavenly host, he turned to her brightly, his voice full and resonant: "Of course God wishes. Haven't you been a virtuous wife, a woman of valor and piety? God wills that you give birth to a son, and that you... and I bring him up to.....!" He stopped abruptly, as if suddenly he had discovered that the unfinished words never must be said. Had he had another vision? One that his wife in her present condition must not hear of? Had he looked into the future and seen the time-limit set

upon himself and his wife - the time they were allowed to live and bring up their son?

Esther knew nothing of this, and in her happiness she hadn't noticed the slight trembling in her husband's slight body, or the sudden paleness of his face. If she had she had attributed it to his lack of nourishment, and the sudden excitement. And as she looked up to him she knew that his words were prophetic, that the Almighty had heard his prayer, that there was no denying it. That it was stronger than the storm, the thunder and the earthquake, that his words were as stable and as inevitable as the sun and the stars and the moon. A flush of happiness transfused her face and relaxed her body. Even the pains that were surely there ceased to make their presence felt.

The world of checks and balances, of compensation and retribution; of reward and penalty. The cosmic balance: the evil and the good. The retribution of the evil for the reward of the good. His wife and yet unborn child were safe. They, all three, would be happy - but the happiness would not last. It was the judgment of the heavens. He saw in the stars, in the Countenance of the Presence: The judgment and the decree! The decree already promulgated. No intercedence there. The door is shut tight before him, so that not even a word or ~~prayer~~ from him would have a chance. No channel open to him. And so it must be. How, and the whereabouts of the event of their, his and Esther's, demise was not revealed. The Book of Judgment closed. No reprieve. Was it something in him that was amiss? Surely, his Esther was guiltless.

Had her days on earth been decreed before birth to come to their end on this day of the Ninth of Ab, and had been reversed in his favor? But the days of Man on earth are numbered and written in the heavenly records, and the books must be balanced sooner or later. In his wife's case it would be later. The balance to come from the days taken from him and given her, that she might live and give birth to their firstborn - a son. The ways of the Lord are ^{inscrutable and} righteous. And he was happy to give of his days to add to his dear wife's account. But still he trembled. He saw violence, and death in the violence. If it only meant him... And he thought of Rabbi Akiba's death at the hands of the Roman executioner. Was he worthy of it? Oh, no, God forbid it should be his wife! She is more worthy than he, but..... oh, Lord..... and the pain that gripped his heart almost blinded him. He felt a weakness in his knees, as if he were sinking, but it was momentary and he remained firm, and upright.

"Thank you, Nechemiah."

She hadn't seen his momentary weakness, ~~then~~, and he was reassured. He thanked the Lord for his lovingkindness. He felt the lifeblood coursing in his veins, and his voice was firm. He said: "Anything else you wish,

my wife?"

He didn't fail to stress the "wife", as if to warn the One Above that the pact between Him and His servant Nechemiah was sealed, and that it must stand - until... until the Day of Judgment...!

"No, Reb Nechemiah, my wish had been granted."

She now prefixed the "Reb" as a mark of respect and reverence. For now he not only was her husband but her seer. Like any other woman she had asked and received his blessing. Like any other woman she must now pay him reverence.

And now seized with trembling, overcome by the storm of prophecy in his soul, he lifted his voice: "Even this very night, Esther, my wife, as we cover our heads with ashes and keen the destruction of The Temple, and our Exile, even tonight a son will be born to thee. And he'll be a symbol of our travail and agony in all the years of our exile. And... oh, God! perhaps also of our deliverance."

"Amen," Esther pronounced weakly, and in piety, as if in answer to a prayer.

She and her rabbi (He was her rabbi, even though he was her husband.) were in His hands. But a young mother's heart flutters at the unknown. And motherhood was the Unknown to her.

The door softly opened and he stood before her. Had he heard her moanings and divined her woman's premonitions? His face was a shining brightness and his eyes glittered with that inner light that was so familiar to her. There wasn't a cloud over the broad depth of his corrugated forehead. Then all is well with him, and all, surely, will be well with her. But the paleness of his somewhat elongated nose, which seemed even longer; the tightly drawn skin over his prominent cheek-bones, which had become more prominent, and the the skin more transparent! It worried her.

After he had gone to the synagogue for the morning service the thought struck her that maybe her husband hadn't ^{eaten} his supper. Of late her rabbi had made it a habit of taking his food to his study. Occasionally, it was true, he would eat; but more often than not she had suspicions that the victuals had found other destinations, other than her husband's mouth. Those visitors to his study - old, young, urchins and vagrants! All hungry. She could detect the tell ^{-tale} signs after such visitations, and knew when her husband had tasted food or not. But she had the good sense not to confront him with reproaches. A rabbi's word or deed is not to be questioned - even though he was her husband. Then in her troubled soul, lest he fall sick from lack of nourishment, she found consolation in his sacrificial spirit, in the holiness of his soul. He had practiced what she had heard him preach: "Cast thy bread upon the waters, not for the sake of later gain, but for the good of the soul - to put food into the mouths of the hungry." But that's all very well, she cried out to herself, that's all very well, but isn't her husband hungry as well? And where is his strength to come from to preach and teach and console those poor souls; and to spend the endless hours in his study on the big tomes and on his writings!

She little understood his long discourses of a Sabbath afternoon, when she watched his lone figure stand on the pulpit among his congregants the long hours until the deep dusk of a winter evening, but she could feel the fast beat of her heart and the pain. Where would his strength come from? It was all so confusing. There always was a press of people in the synagogue on Sabbath afternoons. They came from every town and village for miles around to hear him. The learned gaped with wonder at his exploratory speculations in some difficult passages in the Gemara, or a seemingly superfluous dot or tittle or letter in the Torah; while those of simpler mind satiated their thirst for the Holy Writ as they drank at the well of magic and legend. Mostly she could only see the back of his head and his thin shrunken neck, for he stood facing east, while the women's gallery was back of the main auditorium where the men worshipped. Only on occasion he would turn about for a short moment as if to satisfy a longing of the people in back of him, and then she would observe with bated breath his face, and her heart would leap with joy to see it full and flushed with the glory that was in it. And she was comforted, for she knew that God's spirit dwelt in him, and that the Almighty stood watch over him.

The previous evening she had been too busy to look in on her husband. Busy, what was she busy with? Trivial things, surely, compared with her husband's health. And groaning with the resurrecting pains she got^{up} and went to the rabbi's study.

She entered the cubicle of his study with emotions that stood still, and with an expectant heart that didn't know what to expect; like a priest entering the sanctuary of the Holy of Holies. The air was thick with the leathery smell and mustiness of the old tomes of the Talmud and its commentaries strewn about the table, and in the ceiling-high wall-cases. A volume was opened almost to the middle, and was covered with a bandana kerchief. She knew that the holy pages must never be left exposed naked, but only to the eyes of meditation and study. Right

beside the volume were a few scattered sheets of her husband's writing. With eyes tired of an all night's vigil of pain and worry she glanced at the hand-writing. She could never come to grips with Talmudic writing which was an admixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. And even if she made out the meaning of some of the words, the phrasing and the depth of meaning were entirely beyond her concept. However the script itself was always a revelation and an inspiration to her. The delicate formations of the small rounded letters, each with its own curlicue, each a little entity, a miniature soul - sparkling like jewels, and smiling up to her in their brightest mien - they were dearer to her than all the fabulous jewels in the Czar's crown!

it looked to her, was always a revelation as well as an inspiration to her: the delicate formations of the small rounded letters - each a little entity in itself, a miniature soul; each with its own curlicue; each sparkling like a jewel, and smiling up to her in its brightest mien. They were dearer to her than all the fabulous jewels in the Czar's crown!

Now it was mid-morning, her pain had neither increased nor decreased. And that alarmed her a little. True, it was her first experience, but she had had conversation with many who had great ^wknowledge of such things. The pains were coming and going now for nigh twelve hours, and yet they were almost at a standstill. Was there something wrong that doesn't let the child come? She thinks of her husband again. She was sure he hadn't eaten since the previous morning. Those hollows in his cheeks. It takes so little to fill them. He had given his supper away! She felt grief mixed with a slight irritation. He shouldn't have done ^{it}! True, there was a famine in the land, but hadn't he the same right as anyone else? Oh, what should she do? She felt herself completely helpless; like one drowning, yet wasn't drowning; arms and legs as nerveless as one drowning. There is bread in the house. But what about the daily portion of potatoes to be dug in the garden? She wasn't equal to it. And tonight the Eve of the Fast, from sundown to sundown. What will a pre-fast meal be without potatoes?

She faced about when she heard her husband coming in from the synagogue. Bravely she tried to smile up to him. But Nechemiah's face blanched a little as he gazed at her. He read the tiny convulsions of pain in her face, like tiny changings of light and shadow. Taking her hand he unclasped her tightened cold fingers, as if to warm them in his hands.

"Forgive me, my rabbi, there'll be nothing but bread for the pre-fast meal. I didn't go in the garden..."

"Don't worry, my Esther, there'll be potatoes if I have to dig

them myself," he reassured her.

"God forbid it should come to that," she wrung her hands. Her imagination was playing havoc with her. The image of her rabbi standing among the tall potato weeds in the garden and digging with his hands - hands that had written and shaped those very words she had glimpsed a while ago, and that had enchanted her with ^{their} beauty and secrecy - the mystery of abstraction. A meaning that had no meaning to her. A meaning that had meaning to her for its own sake. And those delicate fingers, created and shaped for only the sacred task intended for them, now besmirched with mud!

He took her hands into his, ^{again} and felt through them the trembling that was in her body. "Calm yourself, my wife. There will be potatoes in the house, and soon." She looked at him and saw that far away look in his eyes, and dropped her own; ~~and~~ she was ashamed for her lack of faith. She was sure now there would be potatoes in the house, for her rabbi ^{had} said so. A smile of happiness now was playing about her pale lips, as the crimson rose to her cheeks with the elation she felt at her husband's presence at her side. Oh, no, she thought, this is not adoration or veneration, that's only for Him, ^{the} Almighty, but she could honor her husband as the direct messenger from Him. And when his eyes have that look in them he is in communion with heaven. Now there was a smile on his face, a sure sign that his prayer, or command, had been granted. She knew that saints may command, and that Almighty must bend to their wishes. Her husband was a saint. It wasn't for the potatoes he was gazing into the heavens, but surely he was interceding in her behalf: that she may come safely through this ordeal facing her. The only problem, the immediate, was the potatoes!

As if in answer to her thoughts, that very second, the beshawled Rachel, next door neighbor, made an appearance holding up an ample and bulging apron by the hem. Her voice preceded her apron, for she was as good a talker as she she was good of heart. Being tall and ample in her own

proportions the filled apron did not appear to bulge too much, and neither did it appear much of a task to her.

she began
"I was in my garden this morning," with strenuous enthusiasm that made her voice a little raspy, "and not seeing you in your part of the garden I thought your time...and I dug some extra potatoes..." She was about to dwell at length on the special qualities of her potatoes, seeing she had come from a potato family, who ^{knew} their manures and fertilizers, when she caught sight of the rabbi's profile and her lips clamped down almost with an audible click. She bowed her head, dropped the load in her apron and hurriedly left the room. The rabbi, smiling, went to his study,

The little chamber served Nechemiah not only as a study but also as a refuge, a haven of safety, an escape from the ^{cares of the} world, the outer world: the world of hard blinding light and cold snow; the strange world. Within the shelter of its walls was his own world, warmed by the lustre and fancy of his own thoughts, a world out of reach of the screwing and conniving and grasping of that other world. His the world of transcendence, the world above the other worlds of earthy and material longing, the pure world of God's domain - and the angels therein. The world of vision, which is of permanence - not like the others which are ephemeral. Permanent like the stars. Permanent, because hunger and satiety are not permanent. Permanent, because he had thought and written his best in this world; permanent, because they'd endure long after he had departed; more permanent than the nondescript, rust-faded garment he is wearing, though permanent enough in his lifetime; more permanent than his perpetual poverty. ^O Poverty! No. He was the richest of men in the permanency of this his little kingdom. Circumscribed in its walled dimensions, it nevertheless is limitless in its dimension of height. There, Jacob's ladder was his - to reach the very heavens. The Almighty Himself! He can hear - and see - His Word in the open volumes around him.

Now poverty reached out and struck him a brutal blow at his most vulnerable point of existence - his spiritual life, his life secluded and set apart for himself. As he entered the room, ^{he found} that the table was absolutely devoid of any shred of writing paper. How to exist! That writing hunger! He had hardly touched food in the past twenty-four hours, and the prospect was very good that he would not have much for a pre-fast meal. But that was all right. He had fasted two days in succession before with the cooperation of his stomach. Through long training his stomach very seldom demanded food on such ^{an} occasion. In fact he enjoyed very much the second foodless day, the delirium of a clear mind, the weightlessness of the body, as he soared (in spirit) higher and higher. It was only then, in such hours, that he could resolve the most knotted and unresolvable Talmudic problems. They were the hours of the triumphant ^{soul}, the true spirit, circumventing the gamut of creation under God's countenance. It was then that his mind was in its greatest kinship with ^{the} mind and intention of the Creator. But his mind, even in the fasting of his earthly body for days on end, could never attain to the spiritual loftiness without the baptism in the deep waters ^{of} his writing.

He felt again for the lone, orphaned copper-coin in the pocket of his long and worn gabardine. It had been a worry to him since the day before when he ^{had} realized that the last sheets were going fast. To spend it, or not to spend it? He could buy a hundred crisp sheets for it. How his eyes lit up at the thought of such an acquisition! He even figured the paragraphs (Though most often he thought of them as a nuisance, serving only one purpose - to interrupt the flow of his thoughts.), and the number of words to the last one of them. The shape and size of the sentences, and the phrasing, to suit the ideas. The ideas, they were bursting like rocket-flares in his head! How his ^{soul} hungered to set them down on those

fresh bright pages! But the coin would also buy half a quart of fresh, warm milk. And his wife - in her condition! All the way from the synagogue his wife was on his mind. She was nearing her term. Nay, her time was at hand. He'll have his first-born - a son. He must give away his coin for ~~the~~ milk.

He thinks of the good Rachel and her potatoes. He shouldn't have shown such a grim profile to her; it was a good-will offering on her part, and a whole-hearted one. But he was not a priest of the old Temple-days to receive tithes from the first in-gatherings. The fact that the congregation owed him sums in wages more than he could count or remember had nothing to do with it. Rachel was his neighbor, a good woman, and he feared it smacked of charity. He had said to his wife there would be potatoes, and at that instant she appeared with a full apron of them! But he hadn't meant that. He had in mind the going out and digging himself, as he had stated. Surely, God couldn't have mistaken his words. No, it couldn't be, only God hadn't wished for him to go into menial work. No, that wasn't it either. He went into a deep discussion with himself: The prophets did menial work, But it could be that He in His wisdom had intended two things. One was ^{to} give poor Rachel a chance for another good deed for the day; and the other was God's way of showing him that he'd profit more in his study than in the garden. But, yes, he was sorry, he must make amends to Rachel.

He put his hand into the pocket to feel for the coin again. A superlative feeling. No, no, it wasn't that at all. Just a mere speculation - and he smiled - how many coins there are in the world. Plenty of them. Copper ones, silver and gold ones. It was quite possible in the annals of history, of human events, that there were, and there are now, rich people in the world who could fill his little room with coin - gold coin. The feel of the coin in his fingers, half expecting it to be a gold coin.

He snatched his hand up quickly, as if he had touched something unclean. Blesphemous! He doesn't lust for gold, God is his witness. Only the paper, the white bright sheets of paper!