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Our Little Jewish Cousin



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Preface

In whatever direction you may travel, – north, south, east, or west, – you will doubtless meet some of your little black-eyed Jewish cousins. They live among us here in America. They also dwell in the countries far away across the wide ocean.

Why are they so scattered, you may ask. Is there no country which is really theirs, and which is ruled over by some one they have chosen? Is there not some place where they can gather together happily whenever they please? The answer is always no.

They cannot say of this land or of that, "It is ours," for they are homeless. Palestine, which was once theirs, is now in the hands of the Turks. Jerusalem, the city they love best in the whole world, is in the power of those who look with scorn upon the Jewish people.

For many centuries they have been scattered far and wide. Their children learn to speak the language of the country where they happen to be born. They play the games and dress in the fashion of that country.

What is it that keeps them Jews? It is their religion, and their religion alone. It binds them as closely together now as it did in

the days when they worshipped in the great temple at Jerusalem, two thousand years ago.

These Jewish cousins would say to us, "Our people have suffered greatly. Yet they do not lose courage. Our parents tell us stories of the glorious past, over and over again. They will not let us forget it, and they teach us to hope for the time when Jerusalem will again be ours, and a new temple, in which we shall be free to worship, will stand upon the spot where the old one was destroyed."

CHAPTER I

THE PLACE OF WAILING

"Come, Esther! Come, Solomon! I am waiting for you," cried a woman's voice.

The two children were in the courtyard, but, when they heard their mother calling, they ran into the house at once.

They knew why they were called, for it was Friday afternoon. Every week at this time they went to the "Place of Wailing" with their parents to weep over the troubles of their people and to think of the old days of Jerusalem, before the Romans conquered the city.

"Esther, your hair needs brushing. Solomon, make your hands and face as clean as possible," said their mother, as she looked at the children.

She loved them very dearly. She was proud of them, too. Solomon was a bright, clever boy, quick in his studies, while Esther was really beautiful. Her glossy black hair hung in long curls down her back. Her black eyes were soft and loving. Her skin was of a pale olive tint, and her cheeks were often flushed a delicate pink.

Her mother looked tenderly at her as she brushed the little girl's hair.

"Mamma, grandma says I look ever so much as you did when

you were my age," said Esther, as she trudged by her mother's side down the narrow street.

"Yes, yes, my child, I have heard her say so. But never mind your looks or mine now. Think of where we are going."

It was a hot walk. The sun was shining brightly. The street, the stone houses, everything around shone dusty gray in colour. There were no sidewalks. When a camel drew near with his load, or a horseman passed by, Esther had to walk close to the walls of the houses for fear the animals would rub against her.

She was born in this old city of Jerusalem. She had never been far away from it, and knew little of the wide streets and broad sidewalks found in many other cities.

She had sometimes heard her father and mother talk of their life in Spain. They came from that country before Esther and her brother were born. It was a long journey, but they had said, "We cannot be happy anywhere except in Jerusalem. That alone is the home of our people."

Esther's father might have grown rich in Spain. He was a trader. He understood his business well. But in Jerusalem it was harder for him to get money.

What a strange name for the place where the family were going this afternoon! But it well deserved to be called "The Place of Wailing." It was a dark, dreary court with stone walls on three sides of it. Many Jews were already there when Esther and her people arrived.

Some of them were seated on the ground. They were weeping

bitterly and rocking their bodies to and fro. Others, with sad faces, were reading from the Hebrew Bible. Still others were kissing the wall and bumping it with their foreheads. Some parts of the rock had actually been worn smooth by the lips of those who had come here week after week and year after year. For they really believed it was a part of the old temple wall.

Little Esther, with her glossy black curls, did just what she saw the others do. The tears began to fall from her eyes as she went close up to the wall and kissed the cold gray stone.

Did all of these people really feel as bad as they seemed to do? Certainly. For they were grieving that Jerusalem was no longer great and no longer theirs. It was now in the hands of the Turks, but, long before they came, the Romans had taken the city from the Jews, after a long and bitter fight.

Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath. It is their holy day, and the time when they rest from work. On Friday afternoon they begin to prepare for the Sabbath. Hundreds of the Jews in Jerusalem gather at the Place of Wailing at that time. They not only weep and read from their Bible, but they also pray to the Lord to take their country out of the hands of their enemies and give it back to them.

As Esther walked home she looked up at the mosque of Omar. It is the Turks' grandest place of worship in the city. Her father told her that it stands on the very spot where Solomon's wonderful temple was built.

"That temple was the most beautiful one ever seen by men,"

said the Jew. "Its brightness was enough to dazzle the eyes of those who looked upon it. Its walls were plated with gold. The very gate was golden.

"A beautiful golden vine, with clusters of grapes as large as a man's body, was draped over the gate. The floor was paved with gold. Golden lilies were carved upon the pillars and mouldings.

"There was no door. But there was a reason for this. It was to show that the heavens are always open. They are closed to no one."

"And now, papa, nothing is left of that beautiful building," said Esther.

"Not one stone, my dear. But we Jews all hope the time will come when it will be rebuilt."

"It was not the first temple which was destroyed by the Romans when they took Jerusalem, was it?"

"Oh, no. The second temple had been standing in its place for hundreds of years at that time. It was wonderfully beautiful, too. Herod the Great spent vast sums of money on it. It was the wonder of every one who looked upon it. But our enemies destroyed it, as you well know."

That evening, while Esther and her brother sat by their father's side, he told them the story of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the brave men and women who tried to save it.

The Jews had feared for some time that something dreadful would happen. They had seen strange visions. While the feast of the Passover was taking place, the great temple was filled with a

light like that of noonday. And this happened at the ninth hour of the night.

Something else quite as wonderful as this took place. The bronze door of the Gate Beautiful opened of itself at the sixth hour of the night. Yet this very gate was so heavy that twenty men could scarcely move it, even when the great iron bolts had been drawn.

Esther looked up at her father with surprised eyes as he told of these things. But when he spoke of seven chariots that drove across the sky, and of the armies the frightened people saw in the clouds, she was still more astonished.

"I should think our soldiers would have lost courage before they were attacked," she exclaimed.

"Not so, Esther. But listen, my child, as I describe the mighty Roman army that soon drew near Jerusalem. Multitudes of Syrians had joined them, and these led the way as they came marching up the heights.

"Titus, the Roman general, followed the Syrians. The spearmen came with him. Next came the legions with their terrible short swords and the trumpets that filled the air with word of their approach.

"Every footman among the Romans was armed with a sword, a lance, and a shield. Besides these, he carried with him a saw, axe, hook, pickaxe, and enough food to last him for three days. The horsemen were also furnished with everything they needed for battle or for a long siege.

"This great army steadily drew nearer and nearer. Do you think the brave soldiers guarding our city trembled with fear as they looked forth from the watch-towers and saw them?"

"Not so, father. A Jew fears nothing."

"You are quite right. But now, let us return to Jerusalem as she stood then. A triple wall, thirty feet high, had been built around the city, except where it was separated from the rest of the country by deep ravines. One wall was quite enough to protect it in such places. Many watch-towers had been set up around the city. It seemed impossible to take it by surprise at any point.

"The temple stood on Mount Moriah in all its glory. But it was not a temple alone. It was also a strong fortress."

"How could the Romans take the city, even if their numbers were so great?" asked Solomon.

"They could never have won, except for one thing. Our people were not wholly united. A party of them under the high priest, Ananus, felt there was no hope. They believed it would be wisest to give up at once and make peace.

"But the others said, 'No, we will fight to the end, and will drive our enemies from the city.' If every one had felt from the first as these did, all would have been well. It was too late when the different parties agreed to work for one end.

"The Romans threw immense stones into the city. They cut down the trees in all the country round, and made towers from which they hoped to fire and destroy the buildings inside the walls.

"They succeeded, for they soon made an opening in the outer wall. Then the second wall gave way before the mighty force. And all this time those Romans, who were stationed across from the city on the Mount of Olives, were throwing such huge stones from their great engines that the houses and people inside Jerusalem were being destroyed, both by day and by night.

"Worse still! they began to lack food and to suffer from starvation. They could not hold out much longer. The time soon came when the last wall was broken down and Titus marched through the streets of the city.

"It was very strange that it was the anniversary of the day when the first temple was destroyed by the soldiers of Babylon.

"'It is on fire! The glorious temple is burning!' cried our people, as they saw the flames. A Roman soldier had kindled the fire without the knowledge of Titus, who had not wished to injure this wonder of the whole world.

"Some of the priests threw themselves into the flames. Before it was destroyed, Titus, with his captains, entered the holy place. The Roman general cried, 'It is more beautiful than I even imagined. Its riches are a perfect marvel.'

"The golden candlesticks and tables and cups, the sweet spices of which the priests made incense, the precious stones, were laid at the feet of the conqueror."

"What did he do with all this wealth?" asked Esther.

"He carried most of it back to Rome. But he rewarded the bravest of his soldiers with crowns of gold and chains of silver.

"He had fought for many days before Jerusalem gave up. In that time the country around us had been ruined. The forests had been cut down for the making of engines of war. The herds of cattle had been killed to furnish food for the army of Titus. The harvests had been gathered for the same purpose. As for the people themselves, more than a million were killed and the rest were made the slaves of the Romans."

"Don't feel bad, papa," said Esther, lovingly. "That was a very long time ago."

"Yes, Esther, but our people have been scattered over the world ever since then. We shall never be happy till we are once more the rulers of this city."

"Mother told me a story, the other day," said Solomon, who had not spoken for a long time. "It was about a family who lived here when Titus appeared before our gates. I think she told it to make me brave."

"What is the story, Solomon?" asked his father.

"There was a brave man in our city. He was of noble blood and true to his faith. He had a faithful wife and seven sons. You shall hear how brave and true they were."

"The Roman army began the terrible siege. Before it was over, the brave noble was killed, but his wife and children lived. After Titus entered the city, he heard of this family. He ordered them to be brought before him."

"As they stood in his presence he spoke to each in turn. He offered them freedom if they would give up their faith and bow

down before his gods. But not one of them hesitated. They had not a single thought of giving up their faith in the one living God. No, not for the sake of life.

"One by one they were led away to death. At last, only the youngest son was left before the conqueror. Titus was moved to pity for the beautiful boy. He really wished to save him. He said, 'My child, see! I will drop my ring for the sake of the gods. If thou wilt pick it up, thy life shall be spared.'

"The boy looked up at him firmly. He answered, 'It shall lie there where you dropped it. I am afraid of no living man. I fear only the thought of life without the One God.'"

"Of course, he followed his brothers. But what became of the mother?" asked Esther.

"She begged to die with her sons. She said Abraham had built one altar on which to sacrifice to God. She had built seven! And she spoke truly."

"It is a noble story of noble people," said the children's father. "There were many like them in that old time. Let us hope there are still many in the world."

CHAPTER II

THE GAZELLE

"Shall I help?" asked Solomon.

"Yes, indeed. Take the seeds in the skirts of your coat and come along," was the answer.

Solomon and Esther were visiting some friends in a village near Jerusalem. It was the month of December and the time to plant the crops in Palestine.

"After we have scattered the grain," Solomon's friend Levi said, "the camel shall help us plough the ground. Then the seed will take care of itself."

It did not surprise Solomon to hear of a camel drawing a plough.

Levi's camel was as useful to him as horses are to farmers in America. Solomon and Esther had been at their friend's many times when the great, slow, clumsy animal helped his master about the farm and garden.

"He isn't handsome, but I love the dear old fellow," said Levi. "He is more patient than most camels. I know he is slow beside some of his fellows, but he cannot help that." Levi stroked the camel's head.

"There, see! He likes to have me notice him as well as my new pet."

The camel bent his head down toward his master, with a look that said as plainly as words, "I love you, master, for you are kind to me."

"What is the new pet, Levi?" asked Solomon.

"When I get through my sowing, you may go into the house and call Esther. Then you two shall see it together."

Solomon could hardly wait for Levi to finish his work. But at last the seeds were all scattered.

"I won't go at the ploughing just yet. I am tired, and it is warm. We will rest awhile. I know you are anxious to find out what I have to show you. I got it for my wife, Rebecca."

Levi was a young man and had been married only a short time. He was very fond of his pretty wife, and liked to have surprises for her. He led the way to the house where Esther was talking with Rebecca.

"Solomon wishes to see our new pet," he said. "Have you told Esther about it?"

"Not yet. We will all go together," answered the young Jewess.

They went out to the stable and Levi pointed to a bed of straw over in the corner. There something lay curled up and sound asleep.

"It's a gazelle. Oh, what a beauty!" cried Esther. "It's only a baby still."

"I never saw such a little one before," said Solomon. "May I take it up in my arms?"

The gazelle waked up at the sound of voices. It opened its soft,

dark eyes with a frightened look.

"It is very shy," said Rebecca. "But we pet it so much it will soon get over its fear. You children ought to see it run and frolic with me."

"Here, little one, come and eat," said the gazelle's mistress, in a low, sweet voice.

It sprang up and started toward Rebecca. But, when it had come half-way, it became frightened again at the sight of the visitors. The food looked too tempting, however, and it came to Rebecca's side.

"I believe no other animal has as beautiful eyes as the gazelle. It is certainly the most graceful of all creatures," said Levi.

"See how white its breast is!" said Esther. "The dear little thing! Mayn't I hold it for just a minute?"

"Certainly, dear."

Rebecca was very fond of Esther and her brother. She loved to have them visit her. She picked up the gazelle and put it in the little girl's lap as soon as she had seated herself on a pile of straw.

Esther patted the gazelle tenderly. "It is better than any doll. I wish I had one of my own. I should love it dearly."

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