

## THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

### *Esther i.*

2 In those days when King Ahasuerus sat upon the throne in the palace at Shushan,

3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces being before him:

4 When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days.

5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden;

6 Where were white, green and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black marble.

7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, and royal wine in abundance.

9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house.

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded:

11 To bring Vashti the queen with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.

12 But the queen Vashti refused to come: therefore was the king very wroth.

13 Then the king said to the wise men,

15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to the law?

16 And Memucan answered, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the people that are in the provinces of the king.

17 For this deed shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands. The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.

18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen.

19 If it please the king, let there go a royal command from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.

20 And when the king's decree shall be published throughout his empire, all the wives shall give to their husband's honor, both to great and small.

21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did accordingly to the word of Memucan:

22 For he sent letters into all the provinces, that every man should bear rule in his own house.

**T**HE kingdom of Ahasuerus extended from India to Ethiopia, consisting of one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, an overgrown kingdom which in time sunk by its own weight. The king was fond of display and invited subjects from all his provinces

to come by turns to behold his magnificent palaces and sumptuous entertainments.

He gave two great feasts in the beginning of his reign, one to the nobles and the princes, and one to the people, which lasted over a hundred days. The king had the feast for the men spread in the court under the trees. Vashti entertained her guests in the great hall of the palace. It was not the custom among the Persians for the sexes to eat promiscuously together, especially when the king and the princes were partaking freely of wine.

This feast ended in heaviness, not as Balshazzar's with a handwriting on the wall, nor like that of Job's children with a wind from the wilderness, but by the folly of the king, with an unhappy falling out between the queen and himself, which ended the feast abruptly and sent the guests away silent and ashamed. He sent seven different messages to Vashti to put on her royal crown, which greatly enhanced her beauty, and come to show his guests the majesty of his queen. But to all the chamberlains alike she said, "Go tell the king I will not come; dignity and modesty alike forbid."

This vanity of a drunken man illustrates the truth of an old proverb, "When the wine is in, the wit is out." Josephus says that all the court heard his command; hence, while he was showing the glory of his court, he also showed that he had a wife who would do as she pleased.

Besides seven chamberlains he had seven learned counsellors whom he consulted on all the affairs of State. The day after the feast, when all were sober once more, they held a cabinet council to discuss a proper punishment for the rebellious queen. Memucan, Secretary of State, advised that she be divorced for her disobedience and ordered "to come no more before the king," for unless she was severely punished, he said, all the women of Medea and of Persia would despise the commands of their husbands.

We have some grand types of women presented for our admiration in the Bible. Deborah for her courage and military prowess; Huldah for her learning, prophetic insight and statesmanship, seated in the college in Jerusalem, where Josiah the king sent his cabinet ministers to consult her as to the policy of his government; Esther,

who ruled as well as reigned, and Vashti, who scorned the Apostle's command, "Wives, obey your husbands." She refused the king's orders to grace with her presence his revelling court. Tennyson pays this tribute to her virtue and dignity:

"Oh, Vashti! noble Vashti!  
Summoned forth, she kept her state,  
And left the drunken king to brawl  
In Shushan underneath his palms."

E. C. S.

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The feast, with the preliminary exhibition of the king's magnificent palace and treasures, was not a social occasion in which the king and the queen participated under the same roof. The equal dignity of woman and of queen as companion of the king was not recognized. The men feasted together purely as a physical enjoyment. If there was any intellectual feature of the occasion it is not recorded. On the seventh day, when appetite was satiated and the heart of the king was merry with wine, as a further means of gratifying sensual tastes and exhibiting his power, the king bethought him of the beauty of the queen.

The command to the chamberlains was to bring Vashti. It was such an order as he might have sent to the jester, or to any other person whose sole duty was to do the king's bidding, and whose presence might add to the entertainment of his assemblage of men. It was not an invitation which anywise recognized the queen's condescension in honoring the company by her presence.

But Vashti refused to come at the king's command! An unprecedented act of both wife and queen. Probably Vashti had had previous knowledge of the condition of the king when his heart was merry with wine and when the physical man was under the effects of seven day's conviviality. She had a higher idea of womanly dignity than placing herself on exhibition as one of the king's possessions, which it pleased him to present to his assembled princes. Vashti is conspicuous as the first woman recorded whose self-respect and

courage enabled her to act contrary to the will of her husband. She was the first "woman who dared."

This was the more marked because her husband was also king. So far as the record proves, woman had been obedient to the commands of the husband and the father, or, if seeking to avoid them, had sought indirect methods and diplomacy. It was the first exhibition of the individual sovereignty of woman on record. Excepting Deborah as judge, no example had been given of a woman who formed her own judgment and acted upon it. There had been no exhibition of a self-respecting womanhood which might stand for a higher type of social life than was customary among men.

Vashti was the prototype of the higher unfoldment of woman beyond her time. She stands for the point in human development when womanliness asserts itself and begins to revolt and to throw off the yoke of sensualism and of tyranny. Her revolt was not an overt act, or a criticism of the proceedings of the king. It was merely exercising her own judgment as to her own proceeding. She did not choose to be brought before the assembly of men as an exhibit. The growth of self-respect and of individual sovereignty in woman has been slow. The sequence of Vashti's refusal to obey the king suggests at least one of the reasons why the law has been made, as it has down to the present day, by men alone. Woman has not been consulted, as she is not consulted to-day about any law, even such as bears especially upon herself, but was and is expected to obey it.

The idea of maintaining the respect of women and of wives by worthiness and by nobility of character and of manner, had not been born in the man of that day. The husband was to be held an authority. His superiority was his power to command obedience.

"And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both great and small."

King Ahasuerus was but a forerunner of the more modern law-maker, who seeks the same end of male rulership, by making the wife and all property the possession of the husband. That every living soul has an inherent right to control its life and activities, and that

woman equally with man should enjoy this opportunity, had not dawned upon the consciousness of the men of the times of Ahasuerus.

Vashti stands out a sublime representative of self-centred womanhood. Rising to the heights of self-consciousness and of self-respect, she takes her soul into her own keeping, and though her position both as wife and as queen are jeopardized, she is true to the Divine aspirations of her nature.

L. B. C.

*Esther ii.*

After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.

2 Then said his servants, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:

3 And let him appoint officers in all the provinces that they may gather together the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace,

4 And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

5 Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai.

7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Moredcai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.

8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house.

11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her.

17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

18 Then the king made a great feast, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

Esther was a Jewess, one of the children of the captivity, an orphan whom Mordecai adopted as his own child. She was beautiful, symmetrical in form, fair in face, and of rare intelligence. Her wisdom and virtue were her greatest gifts. "It is an advantage to a diamond even to be well set." Mordecai was her cousin-german and her guardian. It was said that he intended to marry her; but when he saw what her prospects in life were, and what she might do as a favorite of the king for his own promotion and the safety of his people, he held his individual affection in abeyance for the benefit of his race and the safety of the king; for he soon saw the dishonest, intriguing character of Haman, whom he despised in his heart and to whom he would not bow in passing, nor make any show of respect.

As he was a keeper of the door and sat at the king's gate, he had many opportunities to show his disrespect.

He discovered a plot against the king's life which he revealed to Esther, that, in due time, secured him promotion to the head of the king's cabinet. But in the meantime Haman had the ear of the king; and to revenge the indignities of Mordecai, he decided to slay all the Jews throughout all the provinces of the kingdom, and procured an edict to that effect from the king, and stamped with the king's signet ring the letters that he sent by post into all the provinces. The day was set for this terrible slaughter; and the Jews were fasting in sack-cloth and ashes.

The king loved Esther above all the women and had made her his queen. She was not known at court as a Jewess, but was supposed to be of Persian extraction. Mordecai had told her to say nothing on that subject. Ahasuerus placed the royal crown upon her head, and solemnized her coronation with a great feast, which Esther graced with her presence, at the request of the king. She profited by the example of Vashti, and saw the good policy of at least making a show of obedience in all things. Mordecai walked up and down past her door many times a day; and through a faithful messenger kept her informed of all that transpired, so she was aware of the plot Haman had laid against her people. So she made a banquet for the king and Haman, and told the king the effect of his royal edict and letters sent by post in all the provinces stamped with his ring. She told him of Mordecai's faithfulness in saving his life; that she and Mordecai were Jews, and that it was their people who were to be slain, young and old, women and children, without mercy; that all their possessions were to be confiscated to raise the money which Haman promised to put into the royal treasury, and that Haman had already built a gallows thirty feet high on which Mordecai was to be hanged.

Haman trembled in the presence of the king, who ordered him to be hanged on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai; and the latter was installed as the favorite of the king. The family and the followers of Haman were slain by the thousands, and the Jews were filled with gladness. The day appointed for their de-

struction was one of thanksgiving. They appointed a certain day in the last month of the year, just before the Passover, to be kept ever after as the feast of Purim, one of thanksgiving for their deliverance from the vengeance of Haman. Purim is a Persian word. It is not a holy day feast, but of human appointment. It is celebrated at the present time, and in the service the whole story is told. It is to be regretted that this feast often ends in gluttony.

One commentator says that the Talmud states that in the feast of Purim a man may drink until he knows not the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai." If the Talmud means that he may drink the wine of good fellowship until all feelings of vengeance, hatred and malice are banished from the human soul, the sentiment is not so objectionable as at the first blush it appears. There is one thing in the Jewish service worse than this, and that is for each man to stand up in the synagogue every Sabbath morning and say: "I thank thee, O Lord, that I was not born a woman," as if that were the depth of human degradation. It is to be feared that the thanksgiving feast of the Purim has degenerated in many localities into the same kind of a gathering as the Irish wake.

In the history of Esther, those who believe in special Providence will see that in her coming to the throne multitudes of her people were saved from a cruel death, hence the disobedience of Vashti was providential. A faith "that all things are working together for good," "that good only is positive, evil negative," is most cheerful and sustaining to the believer. I have always regretted that the historian allowed Vashti to drop out of sight so suddenly. Perhaps she was doomed to some menial service, or to entire sequestration in her own apartments.

E. C. S.

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The record fails to state whether or not the king's judgment was modified in regard to Vashti's refusal to appear on exhibition when his wrath abated. But the decree had gone forth, and could not be altered; and Vashti banished, no further record of her fate appears.

The king's ministers at once set about providing a successor to Vashti.

The king in those days had the advantage of the search for fair young virgins, in that he could command the entire collection within his dominions. The only consideration was whether or not the maiden "*pleased*" him. There is no hint that the maiden was expected to signify her acceptance or rejection of the king's choice. She was no more to be consulted than if she had been an animal. Her position as queen was but an added distinction of her lord and master.

Esther, the orphaned and adopted daughter of Mordecai the Jew, was the favored maiden. She was "fair and beautiful." The truth of the historic record of the men of those days is indisputable. Down to the present the average man sums up his estimate of woman by her "looks." Is she fair to look upon is the criterion. Esther was destined to play an important part in the salvation of her people from the destructive purposes of Haman, who had been "set above all the princes who were with him." This young woman, who had been crowned by her royal master because she "*pleased*" him, was called upon by the peril of her people, whom Haman was seeking to destroy, to place her own life in jeopardy, by venturing to obtain audience with the king, without having been summoned into his presence.

When Esther received from Mordecai the assurance, "Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house more than all the Jews," he asked, "Who knoweth, whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" then this young woman rose to the extremity of the situation. She exercised a high degree of wisdom and courage, and bade them return Mordecai this answer:

Go gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.—  
Vs. 15, 16.

She prepared herself thus by fasting to receive and to exercise the power of spirit. Her high purpose was only equalled by her

unfaltering courage and entire self-abnegation. Vashti had exercised heroic courage in asserting womanly dignity and the inherent human right never recognized by kingship, to choose whether to please and to obey the king. Esther, so as to save her people from destruction, risked her life.

This King Ahasuerus, who, according to the record, was only a man of selfish purposes, delighting in power and given to the enjoyment of his passions, was the legal lord and master of two women, each distinguished by a nobility of character well worthy of the distinction of queen. Their royalty was of a higher order than that of sceptres and of crowns. While we rejoice in the higher manhood which the centuries have evolved, we are in this hour reminded of the dominating disposition of King Ahasuerus and the habits of those times. A distinguished man and a scholar in this closing nineteenth century claims that "the family is necessarily a despotism," and that man is the "ruler of the household."

Women as queenly, as noble and as self-sacrificing as was Esther, as self-respecting and as brave as was Vashti, are hampered in their creative office by the unjust statutes of men; but God is marching on; and it is the seed of woman which is to bruise the head of the serpent. It is not man's boasted superiority of intellect through which the eternally working Divine power will perfect the race, but the receptiveness and the love of woman. L. B. C.