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The Spell of the Holy Land
By Archie Bell

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(p. 218)

"The Jews have no dealings with Samaritans," declared the woman whom Jesus met at Jacob's Well. That was nearly two thousand years ago, but it is as true to-day as when the words came from her mouth. And to-day, in addition to the Jews, the same thing might be said of the Christians and Mohammedans with whom the remnants of a once-proud nation rub elbows in the affairs of their daily life. The Samaritan is a thing despised on the face of the earth by Jew and infidel. The end of all things has almost come for him. There are one hundred and seventy members of the faithful huddled together in little white-domed houses around their (p. 219) only remaining synagogue at Nablus. On the distant hilltop is Sabasteih, the ruins of the beautiful metropolis of Samaria and once a stronghold of Herod the Great. The Samaritan of to-day may look from his roof at sunset and see them, as he can see Mount Gerizim, which he considers the place "chosen of the Lord." All of these places have lost their former glory. They seem to have reached the end before "God's Chosen People." The little group of Samaritans, poverty-stricken, degenerate in appearance and despised by men of all other races and creeds, huddle around the diminutive white synagogue and vow that they will remain faithful to the end.

"The struggle is almost over; God, may He be exalted, only knows how long and we shall be no more; but we shall remain faithful," says Jacob, son of Aaron, High Priest of the tribe, and the greybeards at his side, on the little stone bench on his housetop, repeat the vow: "We shall remain faithful."

In the tone of their voices there is the sorrow of centuries, the decay of pride and the wail of blasted hope. Also there is a faint echo of what must once have been bravery, when Samaritans were men among men, and when they could force their wills. Now they seem to be resigned to the (p. 220) fate that awaits them and is rapidly overtaking them.

As I pressed my way through the narrow streets toward their dwellings, dark, narrow passageways scarcely worthy of being called streets at all, dingy alleys into which the light never penetrates because the housetops and balconies meet overhead, I was met at the foot of a narrow stairway by a brother of the High Priest. I was followed by a tribe of hoodlums and Mohammedan children, who threw sticks and stones and spat at me. I was an infidel, I was paying a visit to the despised Samaritans; that was enough to bring down any kind of insults upon my head, and the two guards who accompanied me were kept busy protecting me from missiles which are often dropped upon such as me from overhanging window-ledges.

I pounded on the little wooden door, for I knew that I was expected at an appointed hour, but the keeper of the door hesitated before he opened it, because he feared the fury of the hooting pedestrians. When he finally did turn back the bar the guards hustled me inside and slammed the door closed again. It was a dramatic moment, for it was all unexpected.



JACOB, THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE SAMARITANS.

"The Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." I knew that was true centuries ago, but (p. 221) what I did not know was that even Mohammedan beggars sneer and hoot at the Samaritan remnant as it exists to-day. Their blood brothers have prospered and spread over the face of the earth, but they, one hundred and seventy of them, about all favourable of them that can be said is that they are interesting to the antiquarian and they "remain faithful." At the top of the narrow stairway which led to an irregular white terrace, which was in reality the roofs of the Samaritan dwellings, an old man met me and extended his hand in greeting. His beard was white, his long flowing gown seemed to be a winding-sheet and a white turban was bound around his head. He had a strong face and a dignified bearing, as did other elders of the

tribe whom I saw during my visit, but these features were not characteristic of the younger generation. This was Jacob, son of Aaron, the High Priest. At his side was his eldest son, who, in his turn, if the dwindling tribe endures to another generation, will assume his father's wand of office. The son is a weird individual in appearance. The Samaritan "heir apparent" may not cut his hair, so this youth, perhaps twenty years of age, has two long braids of black hair which are worn in a coil at the back of his neck. His skin is dark and his features are (p. 222) those of an imbecile. Jacob immediately received me and then presented his son, and the latter gibbered and chattered throughout my interview with the High Priest. The others paid no attention to him, apparently well used to his eccentric manner.

"Meester, me spik Anglis," he said, as he grasped my hand. "High Priest no spik Anglis, and yes I do. I have him study Anglis, meester."

But it was to Jacob that I wanted to address my questions, and it was his replies that I desired in better English than the son could muster, so we chatted through an interpreter, as my host led the way over the roofs of snowy whiteness, some of which had little arbours of grapevine and flowering plants. We came to his residence, which was different from the others only in that it had a larger arbour where there were several big sofas.

Apparently it was a big council-chamber, for as we walked along several men of the tribe joined us, and, arriving at the house, they squatted themselves in Oriental fashion upon the divans, seeming to have their regular places to receive the cup of coffee that was soon forthcoming. Jacob clapped his hands and three women came from the house— probably his wives—one bearing a little clay (p. 223) stove about a foot high, in which charcoal was burning, another a pair of hand bellows, and the other a tray filled with cups. The woman with the bellows squatted beside the primitive stove and tried to make the fuel blaze. The second busied herself with the blackened coffee-pot, and the other held the tray until the black stuff had been poured into the cups, then she handed the tray to the eldest son of Jacob and after he had knelt before his father while the latter took a cup from the tray, he served the rest of us and continued to chatter: "Me spik Anglis, High Priest he no can spik Anglis."

"We are very, very poor," began Jacob, after we had gone through the formalities of Oriental coffee-sipping. "You see how we live, and because the people are combined against us we have little opportunity to improve our condition, because work for others is forbidden. We have a few fields which we cultivate, but the product of these fields is barely enough to keep breath in our bodies. Perhaps our chief revenue is from tourists who come to our synagogue to see our ancient copy of the Pentateuch. Many of them are eager enough to see it until they learn that we charge an English shilling for showing it, and, although this is our principal source of income, the strangers who come seem to be very (p. 224) unwilling to contribute. But God's will be done, we shall remain faithful."

"Faithful to what?" I inquired, for the question seemed to be prompted by the constant repetition of the vow.

"To the law of God, who is highly exalted," replied Jacob, and his explanations that followed proved that in his opinion, the Bible—at least that portion of it that is accepted by the Samaritans—must be taken literally, and without any of the "meanings" which modern men have come to look upon as figures of speech.

"Nothing in the Hebrew Bible was inspired after Moses—upon whom be peace," he explained; "we accept nothing later as of Divine origin, but we have the law and we strive to fulfil it."

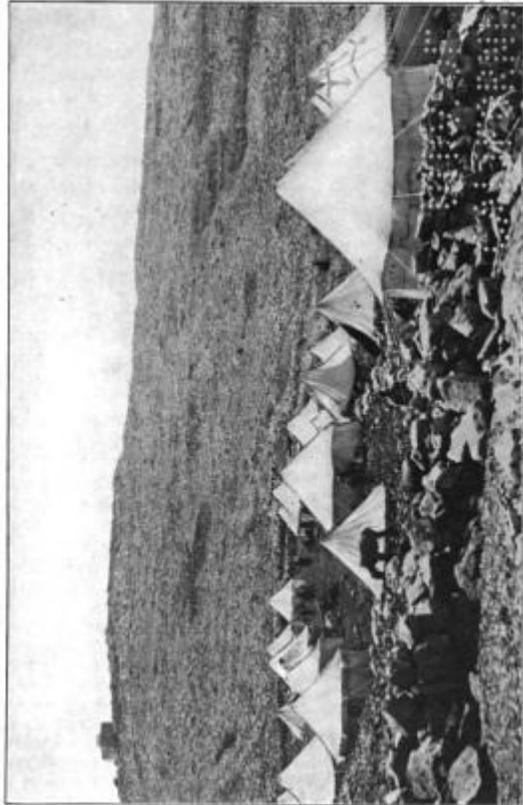
Then Jacob explained to me many of the ancient laws to which he and his people still subscribe, literal observation of which was discarded by the most orthodox Jews of the world centuries ago, and it became plainer and plainer as we chatted that herein is the principal line that separates Jews from Samaritans and makes the latter despised by Jews and infidels alike. They practise polygamy, but they do not marry blood relatives, and will not do so even though the tribe become extinct. When a man (p. 225) dies, the brother marries the widow. While he offered me no evidence that such a law was necessary at this time, the High Priest said that an adulteress is killed, under the law, and that her property is inherited by the high priest who condemns her. When a woman marries outside of the tribe, her property goes to her nearest of kin within the tribe.

Biblical controversies in which the Samaritans have adhered to unpopular views have slowly but surely alienated them from other sects. They insist that the plagues of Egypt lasted but two and one-half months before the Exodus. They believe that the new calendar of the Jews dates from the Exodus, but they also believe that it was merely a re-establishment of the calendar dating from the creation. They believe that the Torah was written by the actual hand of God and that it was passed to Moses in a single scroll in a

language that he could understand. They are particularly bitter against the Jews for the slander against Moses, which says that he was married to a negress, or Cushite woman, interpreting the word "kusheet" to be "kash-sheet," which means "fat, plump or beautiful."

All of these beliefs and minor differences of opinion, have, in the past, led to discussions and (p. 226) quarrels which with the passing of the years and centuries have developed the animosities and hatreds that have gradually driven away the people who were once their friends. Strangest of all, however, is perhaps their strict adherence to the words of the prophets in regard to the Passover. This completely separates them from all other people of the world and makes it literally impossible for them at the present time, to live elsewhere than in the little community of Nablus which is in the shadow of Mount Gerizim. So it was of the celebration of the Passover that I asked Jacob to speak at length, and to each of my questions he had a passage of Scripture in reply, that from his point of view at least made debate or argument impossible.

First I asked him why he felt certain that Mount Gerizim was the place "chosen of the Lord," whereas the Jews have from ancient times ascribed that dignity to Mount Moriah at Jerusalem.



CAMP OF THE SAMARTANS, MOUNT GERIZIM.

"Genesis xii:1," replied Jacob; "God told Abraham to move out of his land and he went to the land of Shechem, which we know is Nablus, and the Lord gave the land to his seed. Abraham was commanded to take Isaac into the land of Moreh (Genesis xxii:2). Jacob slept here when he saw the ladder (Genesis xxviii: 7), and (p. 227) he came back to Shechem (Nablus) in peace" (Genesis xxxiii: 18).

"Why is the Passover celebrated to-day literally as it was commanded?"

"Exodus xii:17, we are told to observe and fulfil this day in our generation as an eternal ordinance. Genesis xii: 24 repeats the same injunction and in Genesis xiii: 10 we are told to celebrate it from year to year."

"Why must a Samaritan live in Nablus?"
"At least he must be here for the Passover. In Deuteronomy xvi: 5, we are told that it is unlawful to celebrate it in other towns and the same passage tells us the date and that the celebration must be at sunset. Exodus xii: 4 permits the poor to join with their

neighbours in the sacrifice, and, as we are very poor, we gather together as we have done for one hundred and twenty-five years and make one company having one furnace. During the celebration our people indulge greatly in praise, glorification and exultation and do not cease doing so throughout the night, Exodus xii: 42. We are told how we must

be dressed, Exodus xii: 11; how we shall select the animals for our sacrifice, Exodus xii: 3; in the sixth verse how it shall be prepared for slaughter; how it shall be cooked in Exodus xii:8-9—that is, broiled so that only fire and (p. 228) not water shall touch it; how it shall be eaten, Exodus xii: 11 and Deuteronomy xvi: 3; and with salt, Leviticus ii: 13; and not a particle of it may remain, Exodus xii: 10."

Occasionally Jacob would admit that a passage was capable of two or more meanings or translations, and when one different than the Samaritans accepted was suggested, he replied only: "God possesses the best knowledge."

The Passover celebration of the Samaritans is the event of their year. Every man, woman and child of the tribe is dressed in a white robe as if preparatory to starting on a journey, sheep are carefully selected, and in a stately procession they file to the top of Mount Gerizim, which they are certain is "the place chosen of the Lord," and where to the best of their ability the ordinances are carried out in strict accordance with biblical command.

As several elders of the tribe arrived at the house, apparently on business of some sort, Jacob told some of the younger men to take me to the synagogue to see the ancient copy of the Pentateuch, which Samaritan tradition declares was written by Aaron or a descendant of Aaron. There were several tourists there inspecting the manuscript and, as Jacob had said, they came eagerly enough, but they hesitated and argued (p. 229) when



GENERAL VIEW OF NABLUS.

they were asked to contribute a shilling for the privilege that they had enjoyed.

As they were wrangling, Jacob came to the synagogue himself and after the other foreigners had left and I was preparing to leave, he asked me to remain until they were out of sight. Then, with a sort of malicious joy, he gave a signal to the boys and they approached the little altar, went behind draperies and brought forth an ancient bronze cylinder, which was opened and a parchment taken out.

"This is our ancient Pentateuch," said the Hight Priest. "We don't show this to the tourists, for the other one satisfies them just as well, and they come to see it merely out of curiosity. That copy is spurious (pointing to the one seen by the earlier delegation to the synagogue), this one is the genuine."

As we left Jacob and his people we soon found ourselves in the midst of Nablus hoodlums again. Although Nablus is the largest city in Palestine between Damascus and Jerusalem, it is isolated in the Valley of Shechem,

untouched by a railroad and somewhat difficult to reach. Yet it has a population of nearly

thirty thousand, is a prosperous city, and in many ways quite unlike any of the other towns one passes on the overland journey by the ancient caravan (p. 230) route between the north and south of Palestine and Syria.

From infancy the children in this city are taught to despise and ridicule persons who do not subscribe to the Moslem faith. Consequently, as they grow up, this ridicule and hatred increases, and it is only the presence of a large number of Turkish soldiers who are commanded to keep order, that keeps the people in check at all, when a foreigner enters the city gates. Before we arrived at the city, having just left the Tomb of Joseph, we noticed that every one our wagon passed was spitting at us. The children by the roadside picked up sticks and pebbles and hurled them at the wagon, hissing the Arabic and Turkish words for "unbeliever," "Christian" and "infidel dog." As we entered the city and passed the cafes, where the ever-present groups of men were sitting smoking and drinking coffee, they looked up, sneered, laughed and brazenly hurled vile names at us to the amusement of the onlookers.

It seemed to be fate that led us past a Moslem cemetery, and as it was Friday all the women were there mourning and offering prayers for the dead. This desecration of sacred ground seemed to aggravate them and they yelled at us, seemingly forgetting their prayers. Men came (p. 231) running and shouting curses at "Christian dogs." Children threw sticks and again spat at us to show their contempt. Our guard and dragoman were kept busy threatening them with punishment if they did not desist, and soon they were joined by a third man in uniform, an official of some sort and probably a Christian, and the three of them were kept busier than the two had been, protecting two fairly innocent strangers who had happened to reach Nablus at sunset and necessarily remained over night before continuing the journey across the country. But Nablus has no use for strangers, unless they be of the Mohammedan faith. They are not wanted in the city at all and are things accursed. A railroad is now building that will join Nablus with Janin, and it is possible that more frequent contact with the outside world will have its effect in the enlightenment of the people. But even this will take time. The spirit of fanaticism is too deeply imbedded in the present generation, and some lively religious conflicts are expected before the people are finally brought into subjugation and toleration. Yet this is the city of Abraham, Jacob and his sons and so many patriarchs of biblical days that it is difficult to enumerate them.

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