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**THE SAMARITAN PASSOVER**

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I

The Samaritans are the smallest and oldest sect in the world. They are little known because of their present insignificance; they penetrate little farther than their rather inaccessible home town of Nablus; and few, be they of Palestine or visitors in the Holy Land, can have an occasion to establish contact with their age-old ritual, so shyly is it practiced, so unadvertised is its existence, and so rarely can it be viewed from the outside world. But last year there was such an occasion- and occasion which occurs only once in every twenty years, when the great Samaritan ceremony of the year, the Passover, is performed in daylight instead of after nightfall.

The Samaritans adhere exclusively to Mosaic Law, admitting of no later interpretations and rejecting all books of the Old Testament save the Pentateuch. The date of their Passover is immutably fixed according to the Lord's injunction to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: 'in the fourteenth day of this month' (the Jewish month of Nisan)- a date which does not ordinarily clash with the rigid routine of the preparation for the Sabbath. But in 1927, the first time for twenty years, the fourteenth day fell on a Friday, April 15, and as the weekly Sabbatical preparation begins, the past year's ceremony, instead of taking place at the setting of the sun, had to be completed by that hour. Thus we of the outside world had the unique opportunity of witnessing in the clear light of day the stages of a ritual which for strangeness is unparalleled in non-pagan countries - for it is the only surviving blood sacrifice to God.

The fact of a blood sacrifice as the supreme yearly festival of a sect which to-day outwardly merges into normal Palestinian life is an anachronism. But the Samaritans themselves are an anachronism. They base their routine of life on the rule of the Patriarchs; their religion to-day is as it was in the Patriarchal ages; and, regardless of modern evolution, they lead an existence of their own, immersed in a long-dead past which they have kept alive since the days of Abraham. They number only one hundred and forty-two souls; and in Nablus- the Shechem of the Bible- this tiny community ekes out a poverty-stricken existence in the poorest and remotest quarter of the town. There, in some thirty-odd houses, they still survive, huddled round their unornate little synagogue, which holds their greatest treasure, the Scroll of the Law, said to have been written by the hand of Abishua, who was the son of Phinhas, who was the son of Eleazar, who was the son of Aaron.

But the Samaritans have not always been thus. They were once lords of Shechem, the Canaanites and the Perizzites of pre-Patriarchal ages, with a population that numbered tens of (page 551) thousands. At Shechem the wanderer Abraham built his altar. A few miles south of the town can still be seen Joseph's tomb, 'in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver.' This degree of intercourse led to other and more intercourse relationships, and when Joshua and the tribes fearfully crossed the Jordan at the end of their long sojourning in the desert it was toward Shechem that they wended their way- a land where a link of tradition existed between them and the dwellers in the country. And there Joshua convened the congregation of Israel and propounded to them 'all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings,' making the northern mountains of Ebal the mountain of cursings and the southern, Gerizim, the mountain of blessings. Propinquity brought fusion and, be it remembered, strife; but in the result a community of religion, and since the days of Joshua

the Samaritans have turned in reverence toward Mount Gerizim when they make their prayers to Jehovah.

Shechem's next historical episode led to the disastrous cleavage in Israel. It was there that Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, forfeited the alliance of the ten tribes by his foolish conceit. 'My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.' So Shechem became the capital of Israel, as Jerusalem was that of Judah, the town fortified by Jeroboam, 'and there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all their days.'

In the eighth century before Christ disaster overtook the Israelites at the hands of Sargon, the King of Assyria. Twenty-seven thousand, two hundred and ninety of them were transported, some to Gozan, some to Media; and in their place Assyrian colonists, 'men from Babylon, from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim,' a mixed horde of Syrian and Babylonian prisoners, were settled in what is now Northern Palestine. And out of this Assyrian plantation scheme, which is reminiscent of English colonization in Northern Ireland, emerged the Samaritan nation- an admixture of the new blood from the East and the remnant of Israel which had escaped transportation. And, as ever, the new wine in the old bottles failed to mature. The Hebrew writer of the second book of Kings tells how 'the Lord sent lions among them [the colonists], which slew some of them'; and their quandary they appealed to Nineveh to send them an Israelite priest to assuage the wrath of the local deity. The altar of Bethel was rebuilt, and side by side with the paganism of the newcomers, the old Law of Moses was reestablished in the land. It was in form a compromise, but in fact a triumph for Israel; for paganism could take not root in a soil where it was out of place, and in time it faded and disappeared. Thus the new Samaritan nation, the product of this strange blend, accepted the deity of Yahweh (Jehovah); and the liturgy, which survives till to-day, once more came into its own.

Meanwhile Judah, relieved from the competition of the North, was left supreme; and in its supremacy elected for a religious isolation which persisted even after the return from its Persian exile. Cyrus had sanctioned the rebuilding of the Temple, and the Samaritans offered their collaboration in the work. But Judah had not learned during the exile the value of local alliances. Zerubbabel rejected the overture: 'Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God.' The schism was complete, and since that day the Samaritans regard Jerusalem as a heresy, their Mount Moreh (page 552) as the authentic Mount Moriah, and proscribe all intercourse, such as marriage, with the Jews.

For another twelve centuries they thrive, a nation of fluctuating power and importance, a people of independence of thought and action. In the first century of our era the Romans had to subjugate them. Later, under the Byzantine Empire, they attacked and massacred the Christians settled in their land, and as punishment were debarred from use of Mount Gerizim for their religious ceremonies. Finally in the sixth century a similar antichristian outrage brought destruction upon them. At the head of a large army, Justinian invaded their strongholds and drove them across the Jordan, where they capitulated. Their synagogues were closed and twenty thousand of the nation were dispersed into exile never to return, some to Persia, others to India, while many accepted Christianity.

From such a disaster they never recovered. Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, traveling in the Holy Land during the twelfth century, found only a thousand of the sect scattered throughout Palestine and Syria; and to-day all that is left of these, the meagre community of one hundred and forty-two persons, is confined within the limits of their miserable quarter in Nablus. Their future is not hopeful. They may not marry outside their community, and though bigamy is allowed if a first wife proves childless, and tradition prescribes that widows must marry their dead husband's nearest relative other than his brother, their numbers do not and are not likely to increase. The results of this limitation are not, however, what might be expected. The members of the sect betray in their appearance none of the weaknesses of inbreeding. The men are lusty, their features and bearing noble and acutely remindful of the Old Testament types. The women are sturdy and well favored, and much more healthy-looking than their Arab sisters; and the standard of longevity of the whole sect is notably high. But the restriction on marriage will in the end take its toll of the already dwindling stock, and a time will come when the ritual of the Samaritan Passover will be but a memory.

## II

On those who availed themselves of the special conditions of last year's ceremony it made an indelible impression. The visitor left a Jerusalem seething with the annual excitement of the Pascal month. For Islam has its Nebi Musa pilgrimage, Christianity its Eastertide, and Jewry its Passover, all within the same fortnight and all clashing within the fastness of the narrow streets and the blind alleys of the Old City, where anything might happen and where in the past terrible things happened. The student of history has only to turn over a few pages of comparatively recent history and he will read a real sigh of relief in the wording of a much harassed Turkish governor's telegram to Constantinople, announcing the conclusion of the clashing festivals of the three creeds: 'Passed in peace.'

The road to Nablus sweeps northward over the Mount of Olives, round hairpin corners, up stony hillsides, and down again into valley bottoms, green as Ireland with the spring sowings. Every mile or two the traveler will be reminded of the Jerusalem he has left behind. Round a corner of the road will appear a Moslem procession bound for the Haram el Sherif in the Old City on its way to Nebi Musa. Fluttering banners, green and gold, precede the party, which chants and claps hands through the choking dust. A row of (page 553) men are dancing curious Arab steps to the swing of heavy broad staffs held high above their heads. And the chanting and the clapping and the dancing all follow the throbbing time of a line of lustily smitten tom-toms which bring up the rear. The rock-bound mountains rise sharply on both sides of the road, heavily terraced for vine and olive culture, and overhead a relentless sun blazes out of a cloudless sky.

An hour and a half will bring the traveler to Nablus. His car will draw up between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim; and he will recognize the mountain of blessings, whither he is bound, by the antlike procession of worshippers and visitors which is already climbing up the steep rocky path to the hilltop plateau where the Passover ritual will be enacted. The Samaritans have been there since the evening before. For them it is a week-long festival. 'In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at even ... until the one and twentieth day of the month at even.' They are in tents on a gently rising slope, and the camp has been so aligned as to face directly on the crest of Gerizim to the south-east, where legend has it that Joshua 'took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.'

It is ten o'clock. The ceremony is due to begin at noon and already the atmosphere is tense with expectation. The Samaritan priesthood, conspicuous in their all-enveloping, white, sleeved cloaks, move here and there. One elder is inspecting the pitlike stone-lined oven into which burning furze and brushwood are being thrown to make it hot against the roasting of the sacrificial lambs, which are browsing tranquilly in the middle of the camp. Another is inspecting the primitive altar within the sacrificial area, a rectangular clearing directly below Gerizim, surrounded by loosely built stone walls and no longer than an average golf green. The altar itself is a deep stone-lined trench, widening out at the end into a circular cavity over which logs have been laid. Across its narrow opening are already balanced two enormous copper cauldrons under which an elder is feeding burning brushwood; for the successful accomplishment of the ritual depends entirely on the oven being red-hot and the water boiling at the appointed moment.

Time is passing and the crowd, which is by now considerable, is gathered outside the walls of the sacrificial area, which is reserved for the Samaritan womenfolk and for special guests. And gradually those who will play a part in the coming ritual begin to arrive. The first-comers are the youth of the community, red-cheeked and brown-eyed children, wearing gala dresses of vivid pinks and reds, and on their heads gaudy handkerchiefs, or, in the case of the boys, scarlet fezzes patterned with sparkling sequins. They are full of the holiday spirit, laughing and playing, running hither and thither in the way of their elders, who, with the sense of their responsibility upon them for the successful issue of the rite, wear a grave and preoccupied mien.

At the farther end of the sacrificial area, away from the altar, a tent has been erected where the preliminary devotions are to take place out of the heat of the noonday sun; and the next arrival, the High Priest, a virile old gentleman of seventy years who has been eight times to Europe and boasts the honor of a presentation to King George, makes his way slowly through the throng into the tent. Once in the shade, but otherwise in sight of all the congregation, he spreads his quilted praying mat towards Gerizim and abandons himself to a form of adoration (page 554) closely resembling the Moslem's devotions towards Mecca. Others of the priesthood and the elders of the community follow in his wake, and the floor of the tent is quickly covered with praying mats on

which they prostrate themselves in preparation for the coming ceremony. Their devotions are suddenly and almost unceremoniously interrupted by the arrival of the lambs. There are seven lambs, each 'with-out blemish, a male of the first year,' well fatted and fleeced and pitifully unconscious of its imminent doom. Place has to be found for them in the tent, for the service is in essence a sanctification of their bodies, and all devotions are suspended while they are being pushed and pulled through the ranks of the worshippers into a corner facing the High Priest.

And now all is ready for the service to begin. The High Priest turns toward the congregation and in a quavering bass slowly chants the prescribed passage from the twelfth chapter of Exodus, verse by verse, pausing after each, to the accompaniment of gusts of hand-clapping and fervent incantation from the congregation around him. The effect is a sustained fortissimo of strong men's voices, noisy, maybe, but crudely impressive with its haunting lilt and minor pathos.

At length the High Priest makes a longer pause in his chant. It is the sign that the moment of sacrifice is approaching. Seven stalwart youths, dressed in clean white trousers, each with a businesslike knife slung round his waist on an orange-colored girdle, rush- the word is no exaggeration- into the tent, seize the seven lambs, and drag them out into the open toward the altar, round which fresh herbage has been profusely strewn. The seven grouped themselves and their victims round the trench on which the cauldrons are now bubbling and steaming; the onlookers break all bounds, and in a state bordering on frenzy push and jostle for a sight; the free place round the altar is in a moment reduced to about the dimensions of a full-sized billiard table. And an eerie hush descends upon the crowd. The Samaritans mumble prayers into their beards; the executioners draw their knives and, with straining ears, stand poised for action; the smoke from the cauldrons swirls chokingly among the waiting onlookers; and from the tent, rising above the subdued murmur of this great excitement, can be heard the singsong monotones of the old High priest: 'And ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month; and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening.' The words break a spell, and a scene ensues which defies description. Willing helpers seize the lambs by the legs, turn them over their backs, and in a trice their throats have been slit. Bursts of applause and wildest acclamation greet the event. Palms are raised to heaven in adoration and gratitude; the air is tense with sounds which are almost animal; hands are plunged in the blood and frenzied parents smear it on their children's faces. And all in a space so constricted that the onlooker can only perspire and shout, for any form of movement is a physical impossibility.

The first rite has been successfully accomplished, and now the purpose of the cauldrons becomes plain. The lambs are to be roasted, and therefore their skins must not be broken. Two elders of the community, each armed with a tin pannikin, bestride the altar trench, dip into the seething cauldrons, and pour the boiling water over the fleeces of the dead animals. Willing hands, apparently insensible to scalds, pat the water down into the roots of the wool, and there starts the odd operation (page 555) of plucking a lamb, - for plucking it is, - so that the skin be not broken against the roasting. Soon patches, white and smooth as billiard balls, appear on the flanks of the carcasses. The pluckers, in a fury of haste, call for more water and ever more water, and with an expedition which can only be described as dizzy, first one and then another carcass emerges above the crowd, bare and white, hoisted on a long pole on which it is borne in triumph into the tent for the ritual of inspection. 'A male of the first year, without blemish.' The function of inspection is the prerogative of the High Priest, who, having pronounced each lamb flawless, proceeds to cut from the flesh that sinew which corresponds with the sinew in the hollow of Jacob's thigh which was damaged in his wrestling with God at the ford of Jabbok. 'Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh.'

Now is the moment for the actual sacrifice to Jehovah. One by one the carcasses are disemboweled, and the viscera carefully collected and carried from the tent to the altar. There they are thoroughly washed in the cauldrons, profusely salted, and laid on the logs that cover the circular end of the sacrificial trench. 'He shall wash the inwards and the legs with water: and the priest shall bring it all, and burn it upon the altar: it is a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the Lord.' Meanwhile the blood of the victims has been collected in a basin, and while the carcasses are being prepared and spitted for roasting on a stout poles, a young elder, carrying a bunch of wild thyme (hyssop), makes a tour of all the tents of the community, striking each with blood. And all the while the chanting of the congregation proceeds unabated. 'There is no God but God: *La illaha illa 'Ila.*' It is the opening of the great incantation of Islam; for

here, as in several other respects, the outward practices of the Samaritans and of the Mohammedans are closely similar.

The carcasses have been spitted ready for roasting, and in a rough procession, headed by the High Priest, they are borne out of the tent to the accompaniment of more ritual and chanting, and one by one are lowered into the red-hot depths of the pit-ovens. A covering of mud-daubed wattle is placed over the mouth, and the community, by now thoroughly exhausted, composes itself, in an atmosphere of savory mutton, for the two hours' wait until the meat is ready for eating. At last the covering is removed, and with a decorum and order that do credit to Samaritan restraint the sizzling flesh is divided among the families, and the ritual of the Passover is at an end.

The traveler turns his back on the glimpse of the Mediterranean, seen distantly through a cleft in the rocky hills, and drops down into the now shadowed valley. Facing him, Ebal, the mountain of cursing, glows red in the rays of the setting sun. Behind him, on Gerizim, the mountain of blessings, all is silent. 'And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.'