

THE  
GOLDEN SCEPTRE;  
OR, THE  
INTERCESSION OF QUEEN ESTHER.

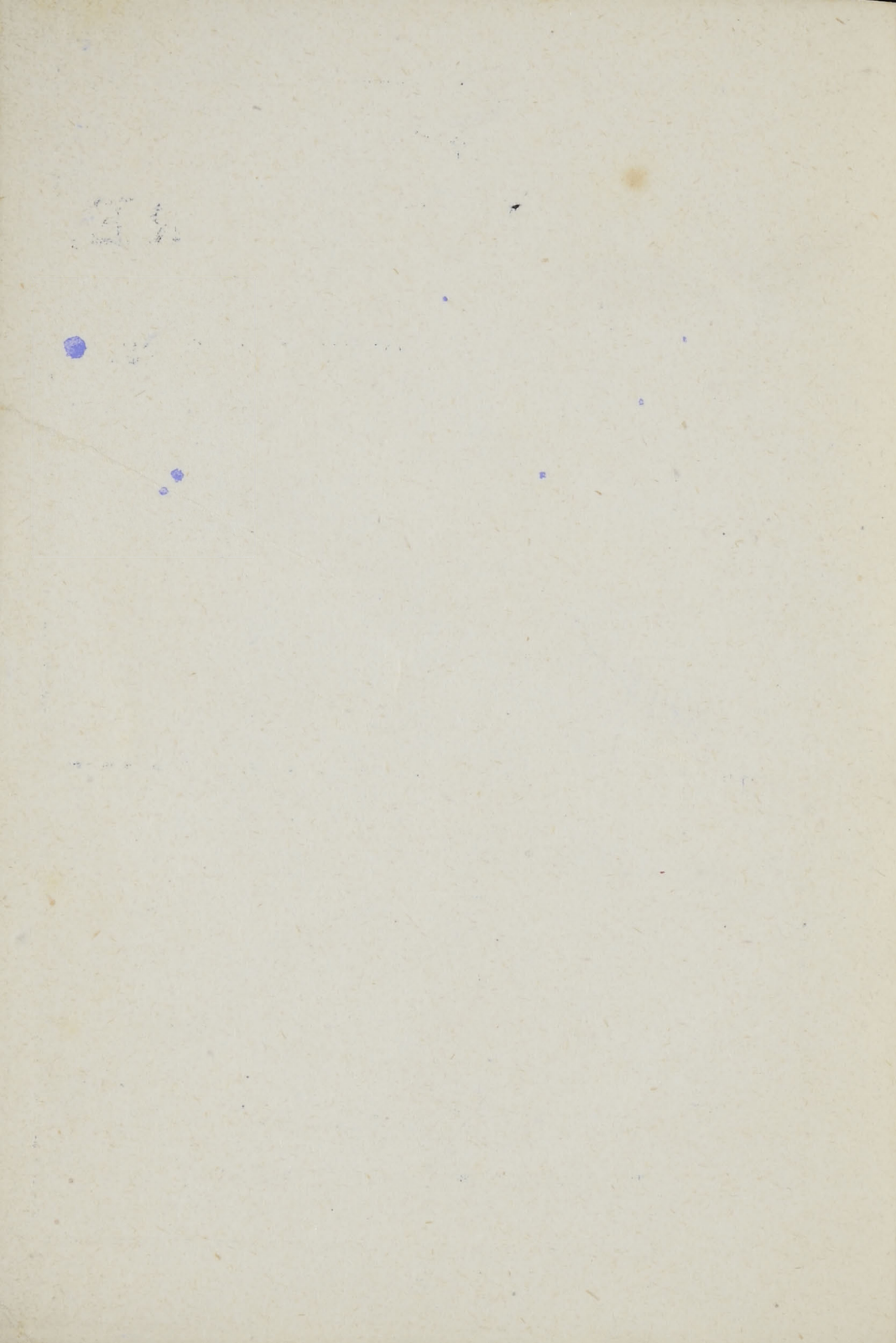
BY THE  
REV. H. C. ADAMS, M.A.

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THE VICTORIA TALES AND  
STORIES.

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Queen Esther's banquet. —p. 14

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**T**HE apartments allotted to Esther the Jewess, the newly-crowned Queen of Ahasuerus, though small compared with the reception-halls and private chambers of the King himself, were nevertheless sufficiently spacious, and furnished with Oriental magnificence. The walls were ornamented with designs worked in gold and crimson, surmounted by gilded cornices, and ceilings inlaid with jewels. The tables and other articles of furniture were of massive silver; the floors laid down with variegated marbles; the couches covered with costly silks from the looms of Thinaë. They looked out upon the gardens of the harem, tastefully planted

*The Golden Sceptre.*

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with spicy shrubs and flowers, and surrounded by a belt of trees which shut out the sight and sound alike of the neighbouring city.

One bright morning in spring—that delicious season in the East, when the earth is one vast garden, gay with the richest colours, and the air laden with the scent of unnumbered flowers—the Queen was sitting at the window of her chamber, lost, as it seemed, in thought. The piece of embroidery, on which she was wont to employ herself at that hour, had fallen on her lap; the damsels with the lutes had desisted from the strains, to which it was plain their mistress paid no heed; the teller of tales looked inquiringly for some signal, before he commenced a new story. Nothing was heard but the low plash of the fountain beneath, or the drowsy hum of the insects among the flowers.

At length the Queen started from her reverie.

“Hath not Hatach yet returned?” she asked. “Methinks, considering what his

*The Golden Sceptre.*

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errand was, he hath been absent longer than we looked for.”

“There is a great stir in the city,” answered Leah, the person addressed. “Some proclamation hath been issued, so the eunuchs say, which has caused general commotion. Perhaps that may have delayed Hatach’s return.”

“Have they seen Mordecai, my uncle, this morning?” inquired the Queen anxiously. “If he is sitting in the gate of the palace, as is his wont at this hour, Hatach must have heard from him all that is needful to be told long ere this. I know that he expects some evil from Haman the Agagite, the foe of our people; and it is even on that account that I sent Hatach to him. If aught hath befallen him——”

“Nay, be comforted, madam,” said Leah; “Hatach is even now returning. I hear his footstep in the corridor. Ha!” she added in a tone audible only to herself, “he is the bearer of no good tidings. His face is troubled, and his look downcast. Hath Haman

*The Golden Sceptre.*

---

indeed compassed the death of his enemy? Methinks the King would scarce permit that, though Haman's favour with him is said daily to grow greater."

Meanwhile, ushered by the favourite waiting-woman of Queen Esther, the eunuch had entered the apartment, and reported that he had news for the ear of his mistress, which he was anxious to impart to her in secret. The Queen accordingly dismissed all her attendants with the exception of Leah; the doors and windows were closed; and Hatach, standing before the chair of his mistress, began his speech.

"I have seen your uncle, royal lady; I have seen Mordecai, the son of Jair the Benjamite," he began. "He bade me tell you——"

"Ha! you have spoken with him?" interrupted his mistress; "then he is safe, he is free! thus far at least he is uninjured?"

"He hath sustained no personal wrong," replied Hatach; "but he is sad at heart, as are all his people, at the terrible doom im-



*The Golden Sceptre.*

---

pending over them. Thou knowest this Haman, the son of Hammadatha, of the evil stock of Amalek, whom thy fathers were commanded to root out—thou knowest how of late he hath been daily gaining a stronger hold on the favour of my lord the King?”

“Yea, I know it,” replied the Queen, sadly. “I know also how he hateth all the seed of Abraham, but especially my uncle Mordecai.”

“True,” interposed Leah; “he hateth the noble Mordecai, because he alone will not fall down and render him worship when he meets him—worship which even my lord the King doth not require at the hands of the Hebrews, knowing as he doth that it is their custom to worship the Lord God of their fathers, and none else. It hath transpired—I heard it this morning, though then I scarce believed it—that two days ago this evil man made a petition to King Artaxerxes, that he would issue a decree against our entire nation. He represented that we were a rebellious people, refusing

*The Golden Sceptre.*

---

obedience to the King's commands, and conspiring continually against peace and order: whom it would be to the advantage of his kingdom utterly to destroy. He hath promised, moreover, to pay into his treasury the sum of ten thousand talents, as the King's portion of the spoil."

"To destroy utterly our whole nation!" exclaimed her hearer in astonishment and horror. "Surely my royal lord and husband would never hearken to a proposal so barbarous and unjust!"

"Alas! he hath already done so," said Hatach; "the damsel speaks truly. This morning hath the edict been published—I have a copy of it with me—whereby, not in Susa only, but throughout all the provinces of the empire, the King's officers are ordered, on the fourteenth day of the month Adar next ensuing, to slay with the sword all the Hebrews, young or old—men, women, or children—and take their possessions for a spoil."

"The edict published!" repeated the

*The Golden Sceptre.*

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Queen. "Then there is no hope, save in the help of the Lord; for by the custom of this people a royal decree, once ratified, can never be revoked or changed!"

"Nay," said Leah, "the wise Mordecai, as I am advised, is not wholly without hope. Doubtless it is the Lord that sendeth succour; but thine uncle and all the chief men of our people think that thou, by the help of the Lord, mayest be made the instrument of our deliverance."

"I, Leah!" cried Esther; "alas! I am as powerless as the humblest in the land. Weak indeed must be the hope, that is founded on my aid!"

"Art thou not the wife, the beloved and favoured wife, of King Ahasuerus?" urged the maiden. "To whom should he listen, if not to thee? Hast thou not already asked and obtained favours at his hand?"

"Thou understandest not what thou sayest, Leah. I cannot even obtain admittance to his presence, unless it should please him to send for me to attend him; and

*The Golden Sceptre.*

---

that, I fear, may scarcely be again. Doubtless it is this wicked Haman's contriving. I see his purpose now, though hitherto I have not understood it; but my lord the King, who was wont of old so often to single out his servant for honour, hath now forgotten me. It is already a month since I was permitted to behold his face; I have little hope that I shall ever be summoned to his presence-chamber again."

"Wherefore wait for the summons?" suggested Leah. "If thou shouldst choose to present thyself before him, who would stay thee?"

"Thou talkest wildly, Leah. No one may approach the King unsummoned, without incurring the penalty of instant death. Hast thou never heard how Intaphernes, one of the chiefest nobles of the land, and the King's own special friend, was nevertheless slain—he and his whole family—because he sought to intrude uninvited on the privacy of King Darius? If the great Persian magnate was thus dealt with, what thinkest

*The Golden Sceptre.*

---

thou would be the lot of the despised Jewess?"

"King Darius did not love Intaphernes, as King Ahasuerus loveth thee, else be sure he would have spared him. Oh, my royal mistress," continued the maiden, throwing herself before the Queen's footstool, and clasping her feet in the earnestness of her entreaty, "thou who wert the chosen companion of my early years, ere this greatness came to thee, have pity on thy kindred, on thy people, on thyself. Even here, within these guarded walls, thy life would not be safe from this man's hatred; and even if thou shouldst thyself escape, how couldst thou bear to survive the entire destruction of thy countrymen? Rouse up thine heart. Make this attempt in the name of the Holy One of Israel, by whose providence thou hast been raised to this great station, and lay up for thyself an abiding-place in the grateful memory of thy people."

"Rise, Leah, rise, my early friend and companion," said the Queen, deeply affected

*The Golden Sceptre.*

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by this appeal. "Thou art right. I am a daughter of Israel still, though the wife of a Gentile King; and I will, if it be necessary, give my life for my country. Only I must first strengthen myself by prayer and fasting—if indeed the God of my fathers will give me courage for the attempt. Return, thou, O Hatach, to my kinsmen, and bid them, too, fast and pray; for, if deliverance should indeed be granted, it can only be through the hand of God, outstretched for the protection of His chosen."

So Queen and people alike humbled themselves before God, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth; and throughout the whole of the three days, prayer was made to God, that He would bless the intercession of His servant. On the fourth day the Queen resumed her royal robes, and tired her head, and decked herself with her richest jewels, to make herself as pleasing as possible in the eyes of her husband. Then she went forth from her apartment, leaning on the arm of Leah, with another maiden following and

## *The Golden Sceptre.*

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bearing her train. She passed along the corridors of the harem, until she reached the gate of the King's private palace, and so onwards to the door of the chamber where Ahasuerus himself was reposing, attended only by the soldiers of his guard. Everywhere the officers in charge of the doors threw them open at her bidding, gazing on her nevertheless in doubt and wonder as she passed calmly on. But, as the last barrier between her and mortal peril was removed, and she beheld the King himself seated upon his throne, arrayed in cloth of gold and precious stones, with his golden sceptre in his hand—a look of displeased surprise on his face at the unlooked-for intrusion—her heart seemed to die within her, and she gave herself up as lost. Aware that she had come unsummoned, the guards stepped forward and raised their battleaxes, awaiting only the signal from the King to strike. The latter seemed to hesitate a moment; but, as his eye rested on the lovely form before him, and the

## *The Golden Sceptre.*

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pleading look of the sweet pale features, his anger passed away like a cloud from the summer sky. He held out the Golden Sceptre in token of his forgiveness of her. Then, rising from his throne, he moved forward, and pressed her to his bosom.

“What wilt thou, Queen Esther?” he said, “and what is thy request? It shall be given thee even to the half of my kingdom.”

The rest is soon told. At the banquet held in her apartments, to which the King came as a guest the ensuing day, accompanied by his favourite minister, the Queen declared the conspiracy which the latter had formed against herself, her uncle Mordecai, and the whole nation to which they belonged, and the treacherous falsehood, by which Haman had thus far succeeded in carrying it into effect. She related how he had ever hated her uncle Mordecai—the true and faithful servant of the King—because he would not yield him the worship which was due to Heaven alone: how, to revenge himself upon his enemy, he had



## *The Golden Sceptre.*

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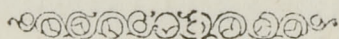
invented untrue charges against the whole people of the Jews, and had induced the King to put his hand to an edict for their total extirpation. The wrath of Ahasuerus was greatly roused. He had already discovered and rewarded the merits of Mordecai, who had proved himself a loyal and trustworthy servant; and it was now clear that he had been cunningly entrapped into furthering a plot, which would alike deprive him of the most faithful of his ministers, and the best beloved of his wives. Haman was straightway arrested by the eunuchs; and the King, having further learned that he had set up a gallows fifty cubits high, on which it was his purpose to have hanged Mordecai, as soon as he had got him into his power—ordered that Haman himself should be hanged thereon instead.

But though justice had thus been done on the enemy of the Lord's people, the decree which he had obtained from the King still remained in force; and according to the law of the Medes and Persians, it could not

## *The Golden Sceptre.*

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be cancelled. All that King Ahasuerus could do, was to issue a new edict, granting permission to the Jews everywhere to arm themselves, and band together against any who might attack them—making it plain to all, that the King no longer desired their destruction. Perceiving this, the royal officers everywhere throughout the provinces so favoured and helped the Hebrews, that they prevailed against their enemies; great numbers of whom they slew, with scarcely any loss or injury to themselves. The two days of this signal triumph were, by command of Esther and Mordecai, set apart for the celebration of a solemn feast in memory of their deliverance. This festival has been observed for more than two thousand years: the Book of Esther is still read in all the synagogues from end to end, with solemn thanksgiving: and as often as the name of Haman occurs in the narrative, the hearers are accustomed to clap their hands and stamp on the ground, crying aloud “Let his name perish!”



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