

# **IN NAAMAN'S HOUSE**

**BY  
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TO  
MY FRIENDS

“Other blessings may be taken away, but if we have acquired a good friend, we have a blessing which improves in value when all others fail.”

# CHAPTER I

## NEW ACQUAINTANCES

"I LIKE not the maiden, Caleb. No good will come of taking in this daughter of strange people."

"Thy words belie thy kind heart, Sarah. Thou wert willing to take under our care the child of my kinsman, even though estranged from his father's house by his marriage. I fear, however," and the man's voice was troubled, "that we shall not be able to make her happy."

"Make her happy!" broke in the woman's indignant tones. "I fear that she will not be able to make herself useful. She hath not so far." Then, more gently, "Yet is she welcome to all we can do for her now that she hath no kin save us, but I am fearful because her mother was of the natives of Canaan so that she hath not been instructed in the way of Jehovah. If she should have a wrong influence over our little Miriam!"

The woman in the doorway glanced over her shoulder at the scene within the dwelling where an animated conversation was in progress.

"Awake, Judith. I myself have awaked early. See, the door hath been opened and the fresh morning breezes blow sweet after the night-time when no air cometh in at all. Father hath almost finished leading out the animals. Did they bother thee last night with their stamping? Peradventure some wild animal was

prowling about outside. Is it not a fine arrangement to have the mangers built between their part of the house and ours? And is it not comforting to know that at night and on stormy days they are safe under the same roof with us? Art thou still asleep?"

An older maiden sprang to her feet. "Who could sleep through thy chatter, Miriam? Thou makest more noise than the oxen and the asses and the cow and the calf all put together." But a smile tempered the severity of the speech.

The younger and smaller maid laughed delightedly and stooping to the floor began to fold the thickly padded rug or quilt on which she had slept, depositing it in a nook in the wall apparently built for the purpose and keeping up a steady stream of talk designed to be informing to the new arrival.

"If our olive trees have a good crop this year, we are going to have curtains to hide the beds. Last year father built this wooden floor to raise our living room above the ground where the animals stay. It is cleaner and dryer now and ants and mice do not trouble us so much. Thinkest thou not we have a splendid home?"

Judith's somewhat cool response caused Miriam to look at her in hurt surprise. The mother flashed a reassuring smile from her seat in the doorway, though never ceasing for a moment her skillful manipulation of a large sieve. It was tossed and shaken and every few minutes tilted sideways to allow a tiny shower of straws and dust to fall upon the ground. While Miriam took up the beds Judith was required to assist her aunt in grinding the newly sieved grain. With a steady, monotonous

motion they worked the wooden handle of the mill back and forth, back and forth, never hastening but never stopping until at last the sound of the grinding became lower and lower and finally ceased, the whole grains of wheat having been crushed into a coarse powder between the upper and lower stones of the mill.

It did not take long for this to be made up into dough, patted into small, flat cakes, and baked quickly in the out-of-doors oven made of heated stones. By ten o'clock, as was usual in the Land of Israel, the morning repast was ready: hot bread, fresh milk, and to-day there were young onions dipped in salt. Had this been winter instead of spring, there might have been a handful of raisins or a few olives or the bread might possibly have been dipped in grape-syrup. This meal was always relished, however, for no other would be cooked until sunset. By the time it was finished the morning mists had rolled away, the sun had dried up the heavy dews of the night before, and the distant fields were calling to the husbandmen.

Linking her arm through Judith's, Miriam guided the newcomer through the one long street of the village.

"Thou hast a beautiful name, Judith, almost as beautiful as thyself."

"A Hittite name, Miriam, what thy people call 'heathen,' so it will not recommend me hereabouts, but thou art named for one of the great women of thy race."

"Oh, not because she was great," was the quick response, "but because she was useful and good. Knowest thou not how she

cared for her baby brother, Moses, when she was just a little maid like me?"

The conversation was cut short by their arrival at a dwelling from whose open doorway voices floated out upon the balmy air.

"Thy father and I toiling and sacrificing for thee, our only child, and thou rebelling when we ask for appreciation and obedience!"

Another voice, choked with sobs, made answer: "Thou didst have no objection to Benjamin until Abner fancied me."

"Dost thou add impudence to stubbornness? It is well thou hast thy father and me to see that thy folly doth not ruin thy young life."

Catching sight of the two hesitating upon the threshold, the woman hastened to welcome them, then turned to the girl she had first addressed: "Wipe away thy tears and take thy water jar. See, Rachel, here is Miriam and her young kinswoman from the Plain of Sharon, a maiden of thine own age. Go with them and be diligent in thy task, but this time next year thy feet will take no such journeys nor thy hands be so employed, for thou shalt have servants to do thy bidding."

The woman turned to her work and the three girls proceeded on their way, Miriam walking between the grief-stricken Rachel and the envious Judith, seeking to atone for the silence which had fallen upon each. Thus she began to speak in joyous enthusiasm:



“Now that the rains are over for the season, dost thou notice how sweet is the air? Every breeze bringeth the mingled scent of wild flowers which the hand of the Lord hath planted to delight the bees and us. Even from here we can tell what their faces will be like when we see them closer: anemones and poppies and wild tulips and arbutus and hosts of others. Even at night it is interesting here, for thou canst not tell whether thou wilt be awakened by the song of a nightingale or the howling of a wolf, and in the daytime, see!”

With a sweep of her arm she indicated the light-green garden patches and wheat-fields in the valley below them and the darker green of the olive groves and patches of oaks and pines nestling among the rugged gray hills on every side.

Neither of the girls commented and Miriam became silent.

At the foot of the path they were descending Judith paused to take breath. “To one who hath but lately come from the level plain along the seacoast, the mountains are wearying,” she remarked. “Why are thy cities perched upon the hilltops when thou must grow thy food in the valleys?”

As Rachel seemed disinclined to talk, Miriam took it upon herself to answer: “To be cool in summer and relieved from danger of flood in winter and safe from our enemies all the time. Knowest thou not how often the Syrians have swooped down upon us, like birds of prey, seeking that wherewith to enrich themselves?” Then, in tones of sympathy: “The path will not seem so steep when thou art used to it. For to-day do thou rest here and I will make two journeys to the spring, one for thee and one for me. Thou knowest we are commanded by our

Law to be mindful of strangers because our people were strangers in the Land of Egypt, and I must remember how lonely I should feel to have to live where nobody knew or loved me even as thou.”

Judith, deeply touched, was affectionately declining Miriam’s offer of rest when a whoop startled alike the echoes and the girls and the mischievous face of a boy, somewhat older than Miriam, peeped from behind a rock.

“Nathan!” The exclamation was full of distress, and Miriam gazed at a shattered water jar at her feet. “Knowest thou not that jars cost wheat and sometimes olives? But,” soothingly, “never mind, the jar is not wasted, for *these* pieces will make drinking cups and *these* will do to carry coals in. They are splendid sherds. Hast thou noticed, Eli,” as a still older lad came hurrying toward them, “that no matter what is broken there is always something left?”

The entire party was busy picking up bits of pottery from the path, when a youngish man joined them, at sight of whom Rachel immediately called to mind an errand elsewhere and, with a whispered explanation to Miriam, promptly disappeared. While the newcomer was apparently known to the younger girl, her face did not light up with pleasure, although he addressed her gently.

Were they bound for the spring? He was going in the same direction. He had not met Judith before. So she was Miriam’s kinswoman from the Plain of Sharon where the roses grow. Then Sharon had sent her most beautiful rose to bloom near the Jordan! And these lads, he ought to know them. Fine, sturdy

boys. Ah, Hannah's children. He believed that they and their mother lived on a bit of his land. He had the pleasure, now and then, of doing them little favors. Of course he knew them, should probably know them better as time went on. Lads of excellent qualities indeed!

His soft voice trailed on and on. After the manner of the Orient, the man and boys walked ahead, the girls following.

So, thought Judith, this was Abner, the rich suitor for Rachel's unwilling hand and she (Judith) the unwanted guest in an irksome home. If only their places might be reversed! But no hint of inward agitation appeared in her outward manner, nor, when the awe with which the boys had first regarded the newcomer had gradually changed into friendliness and the elder of the two had been beguiled into telling an original story, did she appear to do aught but listen.

He cast it in the form of a fable, after the manner of the young theological students of the day, the "Sons of the Prophet," among whom his father had been numbered:

"Once there was a young ant who lived with a large colony of its relatives in the clean, warm earth. It had everything to make it happy, a good home and abundance of food, yet was it wroth, for its elders required it to work. 'Come,' said they, 'lend thy strength to the task of carrying home this grain that we may live and not die when the wet winter sets in and there is no food to be had.'

"This little ant, however, who had never seen a wet winter, was rebellious and ran off to hide and sulk. Soon it saw a strange

sight: men digging great holes in the fields and coating the floor and walls with a white substance. With his curiosity aroused, he went back to the spot day after day until the sun came out with great heat, the harvest passed and the threshed and winnowed grain was carefully stored in these underground chambers, the cavities being closed in such a way that thieves could not readily discover its hiding place.

“‘Ah,’ said the ant, ‘here is my opportunity. Once inside such a place as that, I should have no fear of cold or hunger, such as my elders are always trying to guard against. Naught would I have to do but eat, sleep and grow fat. Then should I be happy.’

“Forthwith he watched his chance and slipped into a little opening just before the workmen closed it. Alas for his expectations, however, for where moth and rust could not flourish neither could an ant. In the stifling atmosphere he began to grow faint. Tortured in body with this nauseating sickness and in mind with the thought that he had brought all this trouble upon himself by his sloth and selfishness, he finally expired.”

Miriam, who had listened with rapt attention, now beamed upon Judith, who stifled a yawn. The next instant she clutched the younger maid’s arm. “See, Miriam, the little gorge below us is filled with innumerable gray shapes, and from the sound of a reed flute which ascends to us I perceive that it is a shepherd with his flock.”

They came nearer the objects pointed out. Miriam gave one look and a joyous little cry: “It can be no other than my brother, Benjamin, whom thou hast not met before, Judith. He giveth my

father's flock a drink below the spring where the water floweth still and quiet so they will not be frightened. See, he carrieth a lamb in his bosom. Is it not nice that men wear such long, loose garments belted in at the waist, so they can gather the fullness together wherewith to carry things?"

By this time they were near enough for greetings. Miriam bounded forward with an eager salutation for Benjamin and much compassion for the lamb. "See, Judith, it is all torn and bleeding, but its good shepherd hath anointed its wounds with oil and even put some on its head to comfort and refresh it."

Judith listened and smiled. From under lids discreetly lowered she was conscious that both the very young man and the older one were stealing glances of approval at her.

"Peradventure," she thought, "it may not be so uninteresting here after all."

Abner also listened and smiled, making mental calculations. As he moved away there was on his face a look of resolution. "Why not?" he communed with himself. "Fine lads both and can become useful. The younger and sturdier can care for the young of the flock while my shepherds take their mothers out to graze. The elder hath a remarkable mind, coming as he doth of a family which combineth Israel's piety and culture. He can be trained as a clerk. There is trading to be done and accounts to be kept. It should be regarded as a kindness to their mother. Let me see, how much doth she owe me? Yea, enough and more."

Meanwhile Sarah had observed with surprise Rachel's hasty return and now watched with some anxiety for Miriam and Judith.

"I tell thee, Caleb, friendship with a heathen bodeeth no good."

"Surely, Sarah, no harm can come from caring for the orphan and the needy as we are commanded in our Law," and the man's voice was almost harsh in its reproof.

"Seemeth to me it might depend somewhat upon the orphan," murmured the woman, softly, "and my heart hath been strangely heavy since I first beheld this maiden."

## CHAPTER II

### SURPRISES

CALEB'S face expressed entire approval as he looked after Judith, disappearing down the hill. "Thou seest, Sarah, that all this poor child needed was instruction in the way of righteousness."

"And firmness to see that she walketh therein," put in the wife.

"But she hath a willing mind, Sarah. Hast thou not noticed how, of late, she needeth no second bidding to go to the spring? She doth not even wait for Miriam to help; she watcheth to see when the jars need refilling and seeth to them most diligently."

"Yea," was the response, "and I have wondered what—" but Caleb, sighing, was already taking his way to the valley as Judith neared the spring.

A little smile played about her lips. "How strange it is," she thought, "that Benjamin's sheep need a drink of water and our jars must be refilled at exactly the same time every day!"

At that very moment Rachel, with a tiny reed basket of bread on her arm, started in the same direction.

"If I *should* see him while I feed the pigeons," her face was rosy red, "and he *might* be somewhere near, although, of course, if I knew for certain I could not be so bold as to be there too—"

She entered a little gulch whose narrow walls constantly widened as one neared the spring. The air was sweet with aromatic shrubs. A bird hidden somewhere seemed about to burst its throat with melody. Insects buzzed a little song of content. As the girl appeared, a flock of wild pigeons rose from various resting places and circled around her with the familiarity of old friendship. Her thoughts, however, were elsewhere. Peeping through the bushes, she had seen Benjamin and Judith, laughing and talking together with all too evident enjoyment. For a moment—or was it several?—she seemed rooted to the spot with surprise, then, sick at heart, she had dropped down upon the coarse, green grass, grateful for the overhanging rocks and bushes which gave her safe concealment.

To think of Benjamin, who had never cared for any maid but herself! They had been childish sweethearts. Around her neck at this very instant was suspended from a grass-woven chain a bracelet of dried grasses which he had given her once when they played at a wedding. In a thousand ways since then and with a tenderness she could not doubt he had told her of his love. Had he not desired Caleb, his father, to ask her parents' consent to their marriage? True it had been refused, Abner's proposal having been received unexpectedly a day or so earlier, yet she and Benjamin had hoped against hope, and now—

But the pigeons were insistent. They pecked from her basket. They alighted upon her shoulders. They watched for the customary open handful of crumbs from which to eat. Mechanically, since they would not be denied, she fed them.



Abner, passing along the brow of the hill, saw both tableaux. He stopped, looked, and passed on, pondering deeply.

“Rachel is the gentler, the sweeter,” he said to himself, “but this maid from Sharon is likewise pleasing. I wonder! Yea, I wonder!”

In a little while Judith started homeward, the smile still lingering. “What a frank, winning boy!” she meditated, “and not unambitious, either, but I do not envy his charming Rachel the hard work and self-denial she will have as a shepherd’s wife. Strange how she turneth from this man Abner, who hath treasures of oil and wine and grain; who hath men servants and maid servants.”

She stopped and gazed over field after field of barley and wheat, now almost ready for the harvest. “Had I but her opportunity!” She stamped her sandaled foot to the great peril of the water jar and its precious contents, but her rage soon spent itself and she became thoughtful. At last she drew a deep breath.

“Why not?” she asked herself. “Of course an Eastern woman may not decide whom she will marry, but there is no reason why she should not try to influence her fate somewhat,” and, quite calm again, even elated, she turned her face toward the home she found so irksome.

Scarcely had she passed when two young men crossed hastily the well-worn path and started to descend the steep sides of the gulch. Suddenly one placed a detaining hand on the other’s

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