

Herodias

by

Gustave Flaubert

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CHAPTER I

In the eastern side of the Dead Sea rose the citadel of Machaerus. It was built upon a conical peak of basalt, and was surrounded by four deep valleys, one on each side, another in front, and the fourth in the rear. At the base of the citadel, crowding against one another, a group of houses stood within the circle of a wall, whose outlines undulated with the unevenness of the soil. A zigzag road, cutting through the rocks, joined the city to the fortress, the walls of which were about one hundred and twenty cubits high, having numerous angles and ornamental towers that stood out like jewels in this crown of stone overhanging an abyss.

Within the high walls stood a palace, adorned with many richly carved arches, and surrounded by a terrace that on one side of the building spread out below a wide balcony made of sycamore wood, upon which tall poles had been erected to support an awning.

One morning, just before sunrise, the tetrarch, Herod-Antipas, came out alone upon the balcony. He leaned against one of the columns and looked about him.

The crests of the hill-tops in the valley below the palace were just discernible in the light of the false dawn, although their bases, extending to the abyss, were still plunged in darkness. A light mist floated in the air; presently it lifted, and the shores of the Dead Sea became visible. The sun, rising behind Machaerus, spread a rosy flush over the sky, lighting up the stony shores, the hills, and the desert, and illuming the distant mountains of Judea, rugged and grey in the early dawn. En-gedi, the central point of the group, threw a deep black shadow; Hebron, in the background, was round-topped like a dome; Eschol had her pomegranates, Sorek her vineyards, Carmel her fields of sesame; and the tower of Antonia, with its enormous cube, dominated Jerusalem. The tetrarch turned his gaze from it to contemplate the palms of Jericho on his right; and his thoughts dwelt upon other cities of his beloved Galilee,—Capernaum, Endor, Nazareth, Tiberias—whither it might be he would never return.

The Jordan wound its way through the arid plains that met his gaze; white and glittering under the clear sky, it dazzled the eye like snow in the rays of the sun.

The Dead Sea now looked like a sheet of lapis-lazuli; and at its southern extremity, on the coast of Yemen, Antipas recognised clearly what at first he had been able only dimly to perceive. Several tents could now be plainly seen; men carrying spears were moving about among a group of horses; and dying camp-fires shone faintly in the beams of the rising sun.

This was a troop belonging to the sheikh of the Arabs, the daughter of whom the tetrarch had repudiated in order to wed Herodias, already married to one of his brothers, who lived in Italy but who had no pretensions to power.

Antipas was waiting for assistance and reinforcements from the Romans, but as Vitellius, the Governor of Syria, had not yet arrived, he was consumed with impatience and anxiety. Perhaps Agrippa had ruined his cause with the Emperor, he thought. Philip, his third brother, sovereign of Batania, was arming himself clandestinely. The Jews were becoming intolerant of the tetrarch's idolatries; he knew that many were weary of his rule; and he hesitated now between adopting one of two projects: to conciliate the Arabs and win back their allegiance, or to conclude an alliance with the Parthians. Under the pretext of celebrating his birthday, he had planned to bring together, at a grand banquet, the chiefs of his troops, the stewards of his domains, and the most important men from the region about Galilee.

Antipas threw a keen glance along all the roads leading to Machaerus. They were deserted. Eagles were sweeping through the air high above his head; the soldiers of the guard, placed at intervals along the ramparts, slept or dozed, leaning against the walls; all was silent within the castle.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a distant voice, seeming to come from the very depths of the earth. His cheek paled. After an instant's hesitation, he leaned far over the balcony railing, listening intently, but the voice had died away. Presently it rose again upon the quiet air; Antipas clapped his hands together loudly, crying: "Mannaeus! Mannaeus!"

Instantly a man appeared, naked to the waist, after the fashion of a masseur at the bath. Although emaciated, and somewhat advanced in years, he was a giant in stature, and on his hip he wore a cutlass in a bronze scabbard. His bushy hair, gathered up and held in place by a kind of comb, exaggerated the apparent size of his massive head. His eyes were heavy with sleep, but his white teeth shone, his step was light on the flagstones, and his body had the suppleness of an ape, although his countenance was as impassive as that of a mummy.

"Where is he?" demanded the tetrarch of this strange being.

Mannaeus made a movement over his shoulder with his thumb, saying:

"Over there—still there!"

"I thought I heard him cry out."

And Antipas, after drawing a deep breath, asked for news of Iaokanann, afterwards known as St. John the Baptist. Had he been allowed to see the two men who had asked permission to visit his dungeon a few days before, and since that time, had any one discovered for what purpose the men desired to see him?

"They exchanged some strange words with him," Mannaeus replied, "with the mysterious air of robbers conspiring at the cross-roads. Then they departed towards Upper Galilee, saying that they were the bearers of great tidings."

Antipas bent his head for a moment; then raising it quickly, said in a tone full of alarm:

"Guard him! watch him well! Do not allow any one else to see him. Keep the gates shut and the entrance to the dungeon closed fast. It must not even be suspected that he still lives!"

Mannaeus had already attended to all these details, because Iaokanann was a Jew, and, like all the Samaritans, Mannaeus hated the Jews.

Their temple on the Mount of Gerizim, which Moses had designed to be the centre of Israel, had been destroyed since the reign of King Hyrcanus; and the temple at Jerusalem made the Samaritans furious; they regarded its presence as an outrage against themselves, and a permanent injustice. Mannaeus, indeed, had forcibly entered it, for the purpose of defiling its altar with the bones of corpses. Several of his companions, less agile than he, had been caught and beheaded.

From the tetrarch's balcony, the temple was visible through an opening between two hills. The sun, now fully risen, shed a dazzling splendour on its walls of snowy marble and the plates of purest gold that formed its roof. The structure shone like a luminous mountain, and its radiant purity indicated something almost superhuman, eclipsing even its suggestion of opulence and pride.

Mannaeus stretched out his powerful arm towards Zion, and, with clenched fist and his great body drawn to its full height, he launched a bitter anathema at the city, with perfect faith that eventually his curse must be effective.

Antipas listened, without appearing to be shocked at the strength of the invectives.

When the Samaritan had become somewhat calmer, he returned to the subject of the prisoner.

"Sometimes he grows excited," said he, "then he longs to escape or talks about a speedy deliverance. At other times he is as quiet as a sick animal, although I often find him pacing to and fro in his gloomy dungeon, murmuring, 'In order that His glory may increase, mine must diminish.'"

Antipas and Mannaeus looked at each other a moment in silence. But the tetrarch was weary of pondering on this troublesome matter.

The mountain peaks surrounding the palace, looking like great petrified waves, the black depths among the cliffs, the immensity of the blue sky, the rising sun, and the gloomy valley of the abyss, filled the soul of Antipas with a vague unrest; he felt an overwhelming sense of oppression at the sight of the desert, whose uneven piles of sand suggested crumbling amphitheatres or ruined palaces. The hot wind brought an odour of sulphur, as if it had rolled up from cities accursed and buried deeper than the river-bed of the slow-running Jordan.

These aspects of nature, which seemed to his troubled fancy signs of the wrath of the gods, terrified him, and he leaned heavily against the balcony railing, his eyes fixed, his head resting upon his hands.

Presently he felt a light touch upon his shoulder. He turned, and saw Herodias standing beside him. A purple robe enveloped her, falling to her sandaled feet. Having left her chamber hurriedly, she wore no jewels nor other ornaments. A thick tress of rippling black hair hung over her shoulder and hid itself in her bosom; her nostrils, a little too large for beauty, quivered with triumph, and her face was alight with joy. She gently shook the tetrarch's shoulder, and exclaimed exultantly:

"Caesar is our friend! Agrippa has been imprisoned!"

"Who told thee that?"

"I know it!" she replied, adding: "It was because he coveted the crown of Caligula."

While living upon the charity of Antipas and Herodias, Agrippa had intrigued to become king, a title for which the tetrarch was as eager as he. But if this news were true, no more was to be feared from Agrippa's scheming.

"The dungeons of Tiberias are hard to open, and sometimes life itself is uncertain within their depths," said Herodias, with grim significance.

Antipas understood her; and, although she was Agrippa's sister, her atrocious insinuation seemed entirely justifiable to the tetrarch. Murder and outrage were to be expected in the management of political intrigues; they were a part of the fatal inheritance of royal houses; and in the family of Herodias nothing was more common.

Then she rapidly unfolded to the tetrarch the secrets of her recent undertakings, telling him how many men had been bribed, what letters had been intercepted, and the number of spies stationed at the city gates. She did not hesitate even to tell him of her success in an attempt to befool and seduce Eutyches the denunciator.

"And why should I not?" she said; "it cost me nothing. For thee, my lord, have I not done more than that? Did I not even abandon my child?"

After her divorce from Philip, she had indeed left her daughter in Rome, hoping that, as the wife of the tetrarch, she might bear other children. Until that moment she had never spoken to Antipas of her daughter. He asked himself the reason for this sudden display of tenderness.

During their brief conversation several attendants had come out upon the balcony; one slave brought a quantity of large, soft cushions, and arranged them in a kind of temporary couch upon the floor behind his mistress. Herodias sank upon them, and turning her face away from Antipas, seemed to be weeping silently. After a few moments she dried her

eyes, declared that she would dream no more, and that she was, in reality, perfectly happy. She reminded Antipas of their former long delightful interviews in the atrium; their meetings at the baths; their walks along the Sacred Way, and the sweet evening rendezvous at the villa, among the flowery groves, listening to the murmur of splashing fountains, within sight of the Roman Campagna. Her glances were as tender as in former days; she drew near to him, leaned against his breast and caressed him fondly.

But he repelled her soft advances. The love she sought to rekindle had died long ago. He thought instead of all his misfortunes, and of the twelve long years during which the war had continued. Protracted anxiety had visibly aged the tetrarch. His shoulders were bent beneath his violet-bordered toga; his whitening locks were long and mingled with his beard, and the sunlight revealed many lines upon his brow, as well as upon that of Herodias. After the tetrarch's repulse of his wife's tender overtures, the pair gazed morosely at each other.

The mountain paths began to show signs of life. Shepherds were driving their flocks to pasture; children urged heavy-laden donkeys along the roads; while grooms belonging to the palace led the horses to the river to drink. The wayfarers descending from the heights on the farther side of Machaerus disappeared behind the castle; others ascended from the valleys, and after arriving at the palace deposited their burdens in the courtyard. Many of these were purveyors to the tetrarch; others were the servants of his expected guests, arriving in advance of their masters.

Suddenly, at the foot of the terrace on the left, an Essene appeared; he wore a white robe, his feet were bare, and his demeanour indicated that he was a follower of the Stoics. Mannaeus instantly rushed towards the stranger, drawing the cutlass that he wore upon his hip.

"Kill him!" cried Herodias.

"Do not touch him!" the tetrarch commanded.

The two men stood motionless for an instant, then they descended the terrace, both taking a different direction, although they kept their eyes fixed upon each other.

"I know that man," said Herodias, after they had disappeared. "His name is Phanael, and he will try to seek out Iakob, since thou wert so foolish as to allow him to live."

Antipas said that the man might some day be useful to them. His attacks upon Jerusalem would gain them the allegiance of the rest of the Jews.

"No," said Herodias, "the Jews will accept any master, and are incapable of feeling any true patriotism." She added that, as for the man who was trying to influence the people with hopes cherished since the days of Nehemiah, the best policy was to suppress him.

The tetrarch replied that there was no haste about the matter, and expressed his doubt that any real danger was to be feared from Iakobann even affecting to laugh at the idea.

"Do not deceive thyself!" exclaimed Herodias. And she retold the story of her humiliation one day when she was travelling towards Gilead, in order to purchase some of the balm for which that region was famous.

"A multitude was standing on the banks of the stream, my lord; many of the people were putting on their raiment. Standing on a hillock, a strange man was speaking to the gathering. A camel's-skin was wrapped about his loins, and his head was like that of a lion. As soon as he saw me, he launched in my direction all the maledictions of the prophets. His eyes flamed, his voice shook, he raised his arms as if he would draw down lightning upon my head. I could not fly from him; the wheels of my chariot sank in the sand up to the middle; and I could only crawl along, hiding my head with my mantle, and frozen with terror at the curses that poured upon me like a storm from heaven!"

Continuing her harangue, she declared that the knowledge that this man still existed poisoned her very life. When he had been seized and bound with cords, the soldiers were prepared to stab him if he resisted, but he had been quite gentle and obedient. After he had been thrown into prison some one had put venomous serpents into his dungeon, but strange to say, after a time they had died, leaving him uninjured. The inanity of such tricks exasperated Herodias. Besides, she inquired, why did this man make war upon her? What interest moved him to such actions? His injurious words to her, uttered before a throng of listeners, had been repeated and widely circulated; she heard them whispered everywhere. Against a legion of soldiers she would have been brave; but this mysterious influence, more pernicious and powerful than the sword, but impossible to grasp, was maddening! Herodias strode to and fro upon the terrace, white with rage, unable to find words to express the emotions that choked her.

She had a haunting fear that the tetrarch might listen to public opinion after a time, and persuade himself it was his duty to repudiate her. Then, indeed, all would be lost! Since early youth she had cherished a dream that some day she would rule over a great empire. As an important step towards attaining this ambition, she had deserted Philip, her first husband, and married the tetrarch, who now she thought had duped her.

"Ah! I found a powerful support, indeed, when I entered thy family!" she sneered.

"It is at least the equal of thine," Antipas replied.

Herodias felt the blood of the kings and priests, her ancestors, boiling in her veins.

"Thy grandfather was a servile attendant upon the temple of Ascalon!" she went on, with fury. "Thy other ancestors were shepherds, bandits, conductors of caravans, a horde of slaves offered as tribute to King David! My forefathers were the conquerors of thine! The first of the Maccabees drove thy people out of Hebron; Hyrcanus forced them to be circumcised!" Then, with all the contempt of the patrician for the plebeian, the hatred of

Jacob for Esau, she reproached him for his indifference towards palpable outrages to his dignity, his weakness regarding the Phoenicians, who had been false to him, and his cowardly attitude towards the people who detested and insulted herself.

"But thou art like them!" she cried; "Dost regret the loss of the Arab girl who danced upon these very pavements? Take her back! Go and live with her—in her tent! Eat her bread, baked in the ashes! Drink curdled sheep's-milk! Kiss her dark cheeks—and forget me!"

The tetrarch had already forgotten her presence, it appeared. He paid no further heed to her anger, but looked intently at a young girl who had just stepped out upon the balcony of a house not far away. At her side stood an elderly female slave, who held over the girl's head a kind of parasol with a handle made of long, slender reeds. In the middle of the rug spread upon the floor of the balcony stood a large open travelling-hamper or basket, and girdles, veils, head-dresses, and gold and silver ornaments were scattered about in confusion. At intervals the young girl took one object or another in her hands, and held it up admiringly. She was dressed in the costume of the Roman ladies, with a flowing tunic and a peplum ornamented with tassels of emeralds; and blue silken bands confined her hair, which seemed almost too luxuriant, since from time to time she raised a small hand to push back the heavy masses. The parasol half hid the maiden from the gaze of Antipas, but now and then he caught a glimpse of her delicate neck, her large eyes, or a fleeting smile upon her small mouth. He noted that her figure swayed about with a singularly elastic grace and elegance. He leaned forward, his eyes kindled, his breath quickened. All this was not lost upon Herodias, who watched him narrowly.

"Who is that maiden?" the tetrarch asked at last.

Herodias replied that she did not know, and her fierce demeanour suddenly changed to one of gentleness and amiability.

At the entrance to the castle the tetrarch was awaited by several Galileans, the master of the scribes, the chief of the land stewards, the manager of the salt mines, and a Jew from Babylon, commanding his troops of horse. As the tetrarch approached the group, he was greeted with respectful enthusiasm. Acknowledging the acclamations with a grave salute, he entered the castle.

As he proceeded along one of the corridors, Phanael suddenly sprang from a corner and intercepted him.

"What! Art thou still here?" said the tetrarch in displeasure. "Thou seekest Iakob, no doubt."

"And thyself, my lord. I have something of great importance to tell thee."

At a sign from Antipas, the Essene followed him into a somewhat dark and gloomy room.

The daylight came faintly through a grated window. The walls were of a deep shade of crimson, so dark as to look almost black. At one end of the room stood an ebony bed, ornamented with bands of leather. A shield of gold, hanging at the head of the bed, shone like a sun in the obscurity of the apartment. Antipas crossed over to the couch and threw himself upon it in a half-reclining attitude, while Phaniel remained standing before him. Suddenly he raised one hand, and striking a commanding attitude said:

"At times, my lord, the Most High sends a message to the people through one of His sons. Iakannan is one of these. If thou oppress him, thou shalt be punished!"

"But it is he that persecutes me!" exclaimed Antipas. "He asked me to do a thing that was impossible. Since then he has done nothing but revile me. And I was not severe with him when he began his abuse of me. But he had the hardihood to send various men from Machaerus to spread dissension and discontent throughout my domain. A curse upon him! Since he attacks me, I shall defend myself."

"Without doubt, he has expressed his anger with too much violence," Phaniel replied calmly. "But do not heed that further. He must be set free."

"One does not let loose a furious animal," said the tetrarch.

"Have no fear of him now," was the quick reply. "He will go straight to the Arabs, the Gauls, and the Scythians. His work must be extended to the uttermost ends of the earth."

For a moment Antipas appeared lost in thought, as one who sees a vision. Then he said:

"His power over men is indeed great. In spite of myself, I admire him!"

"Then set him free!"

But the tetrarch shook his head. He feared Herodias, Mannaëus, and unknown dangers.

Phaniel tried to persuade him, promising, as a guaranty of the honesty of his projects, the submission of the Essenians to the King. These poor people, clad only in linen, untameable in spite of severe treatment, endowed with the power to divine the future by reading the stars, had succeeded in commanding a certain degree of respect.

"What is the important matter thou wouldst communicate to me?" Antipas inquired, with sudden recollection.

Before Phaniel could reply, a Negro entered the room in great haste. He was covered with dust, and panted so violently that he could scarcely utter the single word:

"Vitellus!"

"Has he arrived?" asked the tetrarch.

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