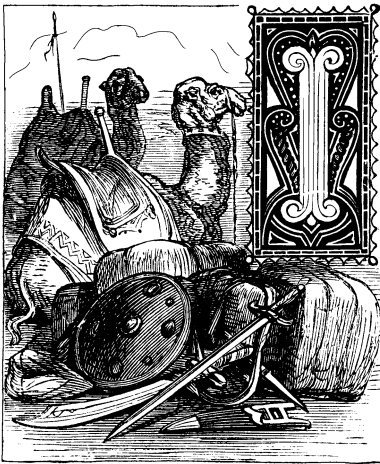


# From Bondage to Freedom

## Chapter I

### Perplexities



T was a busy scene upon which the sun looked down one bright spring day in A.D. 594 — a scene that altogether baffles description, for the World's Fair, gathered at Bostra, a few miles from Damascus, had drawn merchants and traders

from every country in the world. Grave, stately Persians were there with bales of costly embroidered silks and rich shawls; merchants from Alexandria with corn and Egyptian merchandise;

peddlers from Thyatira and Sardis brought purple robes and carpets, while those from the neighbourhood of Tyre contributed white wool, emeralds, and luscious wine. The most valuable as well as the most extensive assortment of merchandise, however, was brought by the caravans of Arabia, for the transit trade of the Arabs was at this time very considerable, and they almost rivalled the Jews in the matter of driving a good bargain.

Besides these, there were gathered large numbers of monks from the neighbouring monasteries, to buy or sell sacred relics, for the traffic in the bones and clothes of martyrs, as well as pieces of the wood of the cross, was now very considerable; and there was likewise another work for them to do at this fair, and that was among the numerous slaves brought from the markets of Rome and Constantinople, to find new masters and fresh scenes of servitude. To minister to their temporal as well as their spiritual wants often fell to the lot of the monks, for the slaves regularly reached this distant fair in the condition of overdriven cattle, and fell fainting by the roadside from fatigue and exhaustion. The merchants and peddlers were generally too busy to listen to the monks; but, today, as a party of them were entering the fair, a tall, stately young Arab watched them so closely and so eagerly that one of the number stopped and ventured to ask whether he wished to speak to them. For a moment the dark, piercing

eyes of the Arab were fixed on the monk's face, as though he would read the secret of his soul, and after a moment's silence he said, "I am in search of the truth."

The monk, however, scarcely understood the mixture of Arabic and Syriac in which he spoke; but, anxious not to lose an opportunity of doing good, he invited him to visit the neighbouring monastery when the shades of evening should put an end to that day's trade—an invitation which the young Arab accepted with profuse yet haughty thanks.

"The soul of thy servant will rejoice to see thee once more," he said, as the monk turned to join his companions, who were now separating in order to commence their work of mercy.

The young Arab watched them from his post of observation near the caravan, while he gave directions for the coupling of camels and dromedaries, and the grooming of a few horses which he had brought to sell.

All day long, amid the noise of the fair, while busy selling myrrh or frankincense, spices or perfumes, gems or pearls, the thoughts of the young merchant would recur to the invitation he had received; and then there would come a far-off look in his eyes, as though he were pondering some deep and perplexing problem, as he looked at his various customers and listened to the curious scraps of conversation going on around him.

“The whole world is falling to pieces!” exclaimed a tall, stately-looking Roman, who, in spite of his shabby dress, gazed contemptuously on the eager throng who were exchanging gold and silver for horses and gems, in which the proud patrician of Rome could no longer indulge. “Yes, it is falling to pieces, this old world,” he continued; “for, now that Rome no longer controls it and holds the leash in her right hand, like a pack of hungry wolves that fall upon each other for want of another victim, the nations of the world are now fighting and will fight.”

“Until another power greater than that of Rome separates the combatants by conquering them in turn,” interrupted his companion, in a similar tone of discontent.

The first speaker shook his head. “Nay, nay; Rome will regain her rights, and that proud city of Constantinople shall sink to her former insignificance,” he said.

“Or be seized upon by Persia, and appropriated as the outpost of her kingdom,” said his friend, with provoking coolness.

“Nay, nay, but Persia is as weak as our own crushed empire of the West, and if she took this city of palaces she could not hold it.”

“I am glad thou dost own that Rome is crushed at last, and that it is enough to see her costliest buildings almost in ruins, and her proudest families dependent on the charity of the Church

for their daily bread, without wanting further horrors to convince thee.”

“True, as thou sayest, my Adrian, our Rome is sorely punished for her former guilt, and her pride hath been humbled; but she is not wholly crushed. The Church is rich in farms and villages around the city, from which our wives and daughters are now fed; and our bishop, Gregory, is as much nobler than the patriarch of Constantinople, who hath lately assumed the title of ‘Universal Bishop,’ as—as thou art greater than yonder Arab peddler,” he added, in a lower tone, glancing toward the young merchant as he spoke.

His friend smiled disdainfully at the comparison. “A Roman of pure patrician blood, and a Saracen of the desert, who drives his camels between Bostra and Yemen,” he muttered; but he added aloud, “Our bishop, Gregory, hath condemned this title of arrogance, ‘Universal Bishop,’ saying none hath the right to claim or take this but the Lord Himself.”

“It were impossible now for one man to be ‘Universal Bishop,’ unless he would rule over a Church divided against itself; for the divisions of the Church are so many now, that it is not easy for the simple and unlearned to know what is right—what is truth and what is error.”

This conversation had taken place close to the tent of the young Arab, who had heard every word, for he happened to be free from custom-

ers just then, and so at leisure to notice what was going on around him. He had been to this fair of Bostra once before—he was then only a boy of thirteen, but it presented such a contrast to his usual life in the far-off town of Mecca that he had never forgotten it; and now the impression revived again in all its force, as he listened to the eager talk, and joined in the thrilling bustle of the active life around him.

It was almost the only glimpse of the world, with its rush of life and care and hope and ambition, which he had ever had, and it sent the swift current of his blood with a quicker pulsation, and an undefined wish arose in his heart to join in the eager rush—to take his place in the surging tide, and make his obscure name known in the world.

From this ambitious reverie he was soon aroused by a customer asking the price of one of the horses, and in the interest of making a good bargain all remoter concerns were forgotten.

At length the sun began to decline toward the horizon, and customers left the fair, while merchants packed up their wares for the night, and either went on to the city of Damascus for superior accommodation, or betook themselves to what lodgings the village could afford.

The Arabs could be indifferent to either. A few native tents had been raised when they first came on the ground; and as soon as pasturage had been

found for the camels, the horses cared for, and the baggage stored, the young factor was at liberty to pay his promised visit to the friendly monk.

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers,”<sup>1</sup> was a command most scrupulously kept by the early Church, and, whatever difference there might be in faith and doctrine, all were alike in the performance of deeds of charity, so that the hospitable door of the monastery stood open to all comers.

“Mohammed, the son of Abdallah, of the tribe of Koreish, crosses the shelter of thine hospitable roof,” he said, as a young monk presented himself at the door.

The young monk smiled, for he was at a loss to understand the strange mixture of language spoken by his visitor, and however great the royal tribe of Koreish might be among Arabians, it was scarcely known as yet beyond the confines of their trackless desert. He, however, bade Mohammed welcome, and led him to a reception hall, while he went to summon one of the older brothers, for he had no doubt that one of them had bidden the young Arab to come on this visit.

Brother Justinian, however, who had given the invitation, had been so taken up with his work among the slaves during the rest of the day that it had quite slipped his memory until he heard of his arrival; and he was half-inclined to wish he had not invited him, for he was very tired and

<sup>1</sup> HEBREWS 13:2

had much to burden his mind just now.

“A little Arab curiosity about our holy religion, I dare say,” he murmured softly to himself. “He will hear all I can tell him of the Lord Jesus and Mary, the sweet mother of God, and then go back to Mecca and worship his shapeless stone idols as though he had not heard a word;” and with a sigh the weary old monk went to his visitor, who was still sitting in the hall.

After the first words of greeting had passed, Justinian ordered a meal to be spread for his guest, and the servitors soon brought in a basket of dates and figs, a loaf of bread, a dish of salt, and a bottle of wine; but Mohammed declined the fruit and wine, only dipping a morsel of bread in the salt as a token of friendship and firm faith in the Christian monk.

After this had been eaten, and Justinian had refreshed himself with some of the weak wine that had been brought in specially for him, he repeated Mohammed’s words of the morning, although he had scarcely understood them then. “Thou wouldst learn something of the truth,” he said, slowly, using a dialect spoken by the Jews and Christians living on the borders of Arabia.

Mohammed could speak this, too, although far less fluently than his own pure Arabic; but he willingly and joyfully adopted it as the means of communication, for he had long sought to know something more than the dim traditions of his



tribe could tell him concerning the God worshipped by his great forefather, Ishmael.

He explained this to the monk, adding that the Koreish had always been devoted worshipers of the two great idols El Lot and El Uzzah, which stood in the Raaba of Mecca, but that he had begun to entertain doubts as to the righteousness of worshiping stones and lumps of clay, when they were so numerous as to be three hundred and sixty general gods, besides special family deities for every person.

“Thou hast done well to seek instruction from the monks of Syria, O son of Abdallah,” said Justinian; “for if thou hadst gone to the heretic Nestorians they would but have led thee into another error. Thou art right; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael is the only true God, and we are His servants.”

“And thou wilt teach thy servant to know this God?” said Mohammed, eagerly.

“I will teach thee what I can concerning the mysteries of our holy religion and Church,” replied the monk; “but if thou wouldst become fully acquainted with the holy Catholic faith thou must place thyself in the hands of the Church and learn as she shall direct.”

A slight cloud passed over the face of the young Arab. “Nay; it is not ‘Catholic faith,’ but the truth concerning the God of Ishmael I am seeking,” he said.

“And it is that I am about to unfold to thee,” said the monk, somewhat shortly.

Mohammed bowed and prepared to listen while Justinian explained, as succinctly as he could, the Scripture history between Abraham and Moses, and then on to the birth of Jesus Christ. Here, however, the peculiar views which many of the Syrian churches had adopted from Arius came in, and in the monk’s recital “Mary, the mother of God,” as she was now called, played so conspicuous a part that, when he spoke soon afterward of the three persons of the Trinity, Mohammed understood him to mean God the Father, Jesus the Son, and Mary the mother.

Very earnest was Justinian in impressing upon the young Arab the importance of honouring the Virgin; and the Lord Jesus was mentioned each time as “the Son of Mary.”

Mohammed bowed his head in assent. “Then you worship one Lord God Almighty, and Jesus as your prophet, and Mary His mother?”

“Yes; Jesus Christ is our Prophet and Teacher and Pattern,” said Justinian.

Again Mohammed bowed, but he did not look quite satisfied. “Thou sayest there are others called Christians. Do they all worship Jesus Christ and Mary, the mother of God?” he asked.

“Yes; the Nestorians and Ebionites and Jacobites and Marianites all worship Jesus Christ, and honour the blessed Virgin Mary, although all do

not worship her as the equal of God and complement of the Trinity, as the Marianites do," said Justinian.

The young Arab looked thoughtful. "I had thought that the God of our great father, Ishmael, was too pure to have a companion—a woman—and a son like mortal man."

Justinian tried to explain this mystery, but Mohammed still looked dissatisfied; but before he left he promised to come to the service in the church the next evening; and Justinian returned to his brother monks rejoicing at the thought of the easy conversion of the young Saracen.

Ah! if he could but have known the grand opportunity he had missed! For if, instead of thrusting forward the dogmas of the Church and the worship of the Virgin, he had given his visitor the simple Gospel narrative of the life and death of Jesus Christ, the Scourge of Europe might have become a peaceful missionary of the cross among his native Arab tribes, instead of raising as his standard the crescent, to bear it down and lead on his people through seas of blood to trample down the rights and liberties of men.