Jephthah's Daughter
THE DARK HEAD bent intently over the steaming pot, exposing a curve of childish cheek and a fringe of feathery lashes. The wooden paddle dipped and brought up, not food, but a length of steaming, dripping cloth of vivid blue, which the worker dropped into a flat wooden bowl standing at the raised hearth's edge. She tilted a tall earthen jar and a sparkle of water splashed into the bowl.

Jephthah's daughter, called Adah, wore a robe of pale blue linen, woven by the servant women of Jephthah's household. She was girded with a gay Roman striped sash, tied in front, the long ends falling to the hem of her garment.

Adah bent over the huge bowl, rinsing the blue-dyed cloth it contained and at last wrung it with deft movements of her wrists and shook it out.

The length of soft wool was a clear, radiant blue, more than a yard in length and almost as wide. She descended the stairway, and hung the cloth in the shadow of the flat-roofed house, over a low bush near the stair.

The voice of a child called urgently and she straightened, a look of joy on the beautiful young face. The voice insisted, "Your father, the great Captain of Israel returns... see... the dust of the company in the distance!"

She skipped quickly up the stair into the doorway and caught up her timbrel with a joyous swoop. The musical tinkle kept time with her dancing feet as she danced through the doorway and downward toward the gate. From the treetop the childish voice cried again. "I see him now... the great warrior of Israel!"

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Jephthah had grown into manhood in the land of his birth, Gilead, but his childhood was not a happy one, although he lived in the house of his father, and was a loved companion to him.

The father of Jephthah was also the father of other, younger sons, but Jephthah held no place of honor in the household as the eldest son, since his mother was not the legal wife of the household. Instead, the legal wife, whom we shall call Zorah, was the mother of the younger sons, and she regarded Jephthah's companionship with his father with a jealous eye. His half-brothers, too, taunted Jephthah with his unhonored status, although they took care to do it only when their father was well out of hearing.

Jephthah approached manhood, bearing silently for his father's sake the unhappy environment of his home. His despair and grief were inconsolable when at last his loved father fell into hopeless illness. The old man, from his couch, called his wife to him, and, with his arm around his beloved son Jephthah, extracted a promise from Zorah that, contrary to popular custom, Jephthah would share in the honors and properties of his estate as his son. Zorah promised, since she wanted the discussion to go no further. Whereupon the brave old man died, believing he had left Jephthah provided for.

But Zorah, steeped in the traditions of her people, and jealous for the sake of her own sons, who she felt were entitled to all honor and properties, soon laid aside her promises. No doubt she was aided and abetted by the sympathy and popular opinion of her neighbors, and so Zorah and her sons drove Jephthah from the home, retaining all rights and privileges for themselves.
Jephthah, shocked and embittered by the broken promise, wandered afar, and at last took up his abode in Mizpeh in the land of Moab, where he married and became the father of a loved and beautiful daughter, she whom our Robert Morris called Adah, meaning "Happiness." But Jephthah must survive still another heavy blow. Soon after the birth of the child, Jephthah's young wife died, leaving him, serious young warrior, to cope with the raising of a young child. This he undertook with joy, holding her by the hour, explaining the ancient Mosaic law.

Again and again Jephthah returned to the thought uppermost in his heart. Here was a young girl, some day to become a woman . . . and an honorable one, he resolved. "Thou shall not bear false witness . . ." spoke the husky voice of Jephthah to his small Adah.

Honor became the measure of existence to Jephthah and to his small daughter, who drank in every word of her adored father. It was a strange companionship these two shared, because it was the custom of the country to hold sons most dear, and to consider daughters a kind of lesser creature. But Adah was her father's only child, and had full measure of his tenderness and companionship.

No subject was too deep for discussion with his Adah, and Jephthah joyed in the depth of understanding small Adah brought to these discussions. They shared the same high sense of honor, the same comprehension and interpretation of the prophets.
"Honor," said Jephthah one day, turning the pages of his memory, "is resident in the heart of God's chosen. The sacred word says, 'If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word, he shall do all that proceedeth out of his mouth.'"

"Then honor," said Adah thoughtfully, "is best expressed by keeping clear the third of our commandments... 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord Thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.'"

"True, little Adah!" praised Jephthah. "The name of the Lord invokes His presence at once. Can one speak falsely in the very presence of the Lord, invite Him to view our evil deeds?"

Small Adah listened countless times to the dramatic story of the Red Sea crossing, her dark eyes round and large at the thought of the wide sea opened for the passage of the Children of Israel.

Jephthah's deep voice told, too, of the burning bush, and the majestic voice of God speaking to Moses out of it... of the guiding cloud that moved across the desert... the awe-inspiring pillar of flame that marked the way at night.
"Forty years they traveled, and their clothes waxed not old . . ." said Jephthah, telling of the Children of Israel.

"Tell me again, Father, about the manna . . ." begged Adah, and Jephthah told again the amazing story of the food that fell from heaven . . . and the clear magic water that flowed from the rock at Moses' touch.

"This staff of Moses was a very special one," said Jephthah one day, when Adah was about fifteen. "I think perhaps this staff was Faith, the great Faith of Moses. The serpent which seemed to writhe at his feet when he cast down his staff at God's command would seem to rob Moses of his faith . . . the age-old serpent, Evil, insisting that his was the power . . . and that there was no staff of Faith upon which to lean."

Adah sighed and leaned back against the wall, raising her dark eyes to Jephthah. "Father, what is Faith?"

"Truly, you are my daughter," said Jephthah slowly, drinking in the sweetness of her earnest young face. "So many times I have asked myself this selfsame question . . . What is faith? And the only answer I have ever found is that first law . . . the first commandment . . . 'Thou shalt have no other gods before . . .'

"I think I understand, Father," said Adah gravely. "Faith so fills one's thought that there is no room for other Gods, and fear may not enter . . . there is no room!"

"That is true, my daughter," assented Jephthah. "There is no hate," he added slowly, remembering Zorah and his half-brothers. "There is only fear . . . fear that we shall lose something . . . fear that we shall not have enough. . . ."
Adah clapped her hands. "Then fear is the wilderness, isn't it? And Faith is knowing that somehow we always find our way out of the wilderness . . . like the Children of Israel!"

But now Jephthah was troubled in spirit, because of the war that brewed in the land of his birth . . . Gilead. The Children of Ammon had swept down again and again on that troubled community, killing and mutilating, and carrying away property and stock, so that the elders of Gilead turned desperately to the outcast Jephthah, and begged him to lead their armies against the marauding Ammonites.

If Jephthah asked himself why the elders did not invite one of his half-brothers, now grown into manhood, to lead their armies, we have no record of it. He only said bitterly, "'When all was well with you, ye drove me from my father's house; now in your distress ye are fain to seek me!' And he demanded and received recognition and power as prince and captain over the land of Gilead.

Jephthah, hoping to avoid open warfare, sent a courier into the land of Ammon to the king, and for a time heralds came and went between Ammon and Gilead, but it was not so to be settled. The Ammonite king claimed the lands of Moab and Gilead, and so at last Jephthah accepted the knowledge that there must be war.

Stalwart Jephthah, mentally and physically sturdy and well-balanced, was also a godly man given to prayer and fasting, and contemplation of the sacred word, although he lived in the land of Moab, where the ugly Chemosh was worshipped and feared. When Jephthah at last accepted the knowledge that there must be war, he put on his cleanest mantle, and journeyed to the holy place. Here, laying aside his sword and sandals at the tabernacle door, he entered
and placed himself in the age-old posture of prayer and humility.

Before him and at the side burned the seven candles, symbol of the unsleeping worship of the faithful children of Israel for the True God . . . but they were not candles in the present day sense of the word. Each was a tiny lamp, burning only the purest beaten olive oil, obtained from the first press of the olives.

In front of Jephthah was the sacrificial or brazen altar, and in the eastern end of the building was the altar of gold . . . a wooden altar, finely carved and inlaid with gold. Upon it incense of prescribed ingredients burned, having been freshly lighted by the priest from the brazen altar for the evening watch.

Here Jephthah 'knelt and prayed, and at last made his terrible vow. His voice lifted in the quiet temple, and the words echoed in the long room, stirring the vail in the East.

"Lord . . ." he prayed, "if Thou shall without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet

An early artist portrays
the return of Jephthah.
From an old Bible.
me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

Jephthah left the temple in a spirit of exaltation, his thought already lifted in gratitude for assured victory. He continued his journey in this spirit until he reached the house, whereupon the small son of one of the servants of his house came out to meet him, shouting with lusty affection. Then was Jephthah's heart troubled, for he considered, "Shall this small boy whom we all love in my house be the sacrifice I shall offer?" And his fierce exaltation returned again, and he declared unto himself, "Yea, even this innocent child who comes now to meet me in joy, shall be offered, if so be it he comes to meet me upon my return. For many sons of Gilead and of Israel shall be offered on the battlefield before the war is finished, and this offering shall be but another warrior fallen in honor."

"So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the Lord delivered them into his hands. And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and behold . . ."

"Quick . . ." called Adah to the young women of the village, who were already gathering to greet the returning warriors . . . "Let us greet my father, the captain of the hosts, here in the gateway of his house . . . and I, his daughter, shall meet him first, and greet the victorious warrior with my welcome."

So spake joyous Adah to the women of the village, whom she had gathered to do honor to her loved father. She knuckled her timbrel with
joyous abandon, and she and the other women began to dance, lovely Adah always nearest the gate, so that she might be the first to greet her loved father.

The tramp of feet grew steadily louder, the dancing faster, and soon Jephthah himself marched in through the gate of his home, and Adah, his only daughter, threw herself into his arms with words of welcome, glad for his safety.

Jephthah, hardened warrior though he was, drew back with an anguished groan, and clutching his mantle from his shoulders, tore it in half, thus announcing, after the fashion of his people, that death was a visitor to his family.

Adah drew back, astonished at such conduct at this joyous moment. She searched her loved father's face, wondering if perhaps his mind had become unhinged from the trials of war. Jephthah, when he could speak, cried aloud, "Alas, my daughter!" And his voice broke and trembled, so that the women wondered. "Thou has brought me very low . . . for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord . . . and I cannot go back." Here he stopped. The women and the returning warriors behind him were still in quiet sympathy.

Adah looked at him lovingly, and her voice was tender for him as she said, "My father, if thou has opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth."

So saying she put her arm about her father, and led the broken man into the house. Outside in the courtyard there was excited chatter for a moment, a child cried, and gradually the crowd dispersed. Soon the gate and pathway of
Jephthah were empty and still in the morning sunshine.

On the wide path lay the timbrel of Adah, its brightly polished brass winking in the sun. A light breeze sprang up, scurrying the dust in the courtyard. It lifted the blue vail from the bush, bore it lightly across the path, and dropped it on the timbrel, extinguishing its brightness.

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