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Mulek of Zarahemla, Chapter II

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Abstract: This series is a novel based on the fictional character Mulek, an inhabitant of the city of Zarahemla during the war between Amalickiah and Moroni. The second part consists of chapter II.

MULEK

of Zarahemla

By J. N. WASHBURN

SYNOPSIS

MULEK and his servant, Omer, were hunting when Mulek was rushed by a raging boar and his leg severely injured before Omer could kill the wounded animal. As he made his way back into the city of Zarahemla, he thought of the strange perversity of fate that had put him who was entitled to be a ruler of the region in an inferior position. The sudden change from king to judge had effected the change. He loved Zarahemla and felt much pride in this city of his fathers. Indeed it was a city to be loved and honored. As he entered the city, he was amused to note that one of the priests, Shiblon, brother of Helaman, chief high priest over the church, was addressing a crowd. Mulek could not resist mocking him, asking whether he was indeed a prophet. Shiblon answered: "Thou hast asked whether I am a prophet, I will tell thee. If it be God's will, thou shalt know this thing when thou goest without friends to applaud, without resources for wickedness, sick in body and soul, humbled to the dust." Mulek shrugged his shoulders and limped away, thinking of Amalickiah, a man of tremendous powers and winning manners who was stirring up widespread interest in a reform of government.

CHAPTER II

IN spite of his seeming eccentricities Mulek was a thoroughgoing Nephite. He was more intelligent, perhaps, than the average, surely better educated. As a general thing the Nephites had leisure and an abundance of riches to enjoy. Their land and climate filled them with pride. In short, they relished life, and this was true of the young prince in an almost exaggerated degree.

On the morning after his hunting accident, however, Mulek found himself, contrary to his usual habit, in a bad frame of mind. His leg was sore and tender despite the tenderness that had been given it. He had slept badly and dreamed of hunters, preaching on the street, being attacked by prophets with long tusks. The hours had brought no rest, and

by morning Mulek was weary and feverish. To pass the time he read. He bathed. He lolled about in his matchless gardens.

Late in the afternoon he heard sounds in the street, sounds of loud talking, of cheering, of people hurrying here and there. Curious, he determined to go for a short walk that he might make inquiries.

He hobbled into the house for a cane to help his sore leg bear some of his weight. He called his servants and gave orders. He called his favorite, the servant and companion, Omer, and cursed him roundly and tenderly because he was fond of him and because his leg hurt. He looked proudly at his gardens and flowers, and then shuddered from pure weariness of mind and body.

He went as far as the walk, just to see the people and hear their excited ejaculations, but he gave up, and a moment later turned back into the great house.

Still the call of the confusion was strong.

Mulek threw a cloak over his shoulders, a good thing to have along in case the sudden end-of-the-day chill found him still away from home. He hobbled into the street and began to mingle with the crowds. It was plain at once that something unusual was happening, for hardly anyone gave him notice. He heard a few snatches of conversation here and there, but not enough to make a connected narrative.

In a few minutes his leg limbered up, and before long he found himself standing before an herb shop he had seen often. He turned inside, mindful of the medicine he was to use.

A young man and a pretty girl were standing together among the



pots and plants that filled the room. At his entrance they both looked up, and the girl moved away from her companion toward the door.

"**M**y father is not here," she told the visitor. "It is not like him thus to remain away from his business. If you will be kind enough to wait a little while, or perhaps we can take to you that which you desire."

"It is nothing urgent," Mulek made answer, observing the young girl with interest. "If your father does not return shortly, I can come again." The girl smiled and went back to her friend. Mulek could not take his eyes from her. She was very young but mature beyond her years. She was proud and eager. She moved with the unpractised grace of a wild thing.

Mulek's musings were interrupted by the arrival of the master of the establishment, a businesslike merchant named Jacob. He was followed by a young man of about Mulek's own age. Jacob inquired what Mulek wanted, and being told, set about its preparation. Mulek, impatient of the delay, turned to the man near him and asked concerning the activity in the streets.

Brightening up, the other told a strange story. In the park, not far from the temple, only that afternoon, Moroni, the young chief captain of the armies of the Nephites, had exhibited his own cloak, ripped



"Only that afternoon, Moroni, the young chief captain of the armies of the Nephites had exhibited his own cloak, ripped along the seams, and fastened to a pole, a sort of banner."

along the seams and fastened to a pole, a sort of banner. On it an inscription signalized the Nephite's love of God, home, and fatherland. Moroni called it the Title of Liberty.

"He called upon all to rise in defense of liberty," declared the man, a gleam in his eyes.

Mulek listened without a word, but his expression altered as the recital progressed. His self-discipline forbade him to show his feelings too clearly, but he was painfully aware that his heart beat faster. A tingle in the small of his back increased to a sort of suffocating feeling in his neck and chest.

The dealer in herbs brought his compound. Mulek paid for it and turned away.

Out in the dusk he chose for his homeward journey a way that was little likely to be too crowded, and even as he did so, his uneasiness increased with the knowledge that he who had never failed to use the brightest streets was now fearing to meet people instead of hoping to meet them.

Two emotions were beginning to make themselves annoyingly persistent, emotions that were new to Mulek. He began to wonder about Moroni whom he had considered a well-meaning but overrated favorite of the chief judge. Was it possible that after all the man might have something that he, Mulek, might emulate or at least envy? It was a

strange thing for him to find in other men excellences that he did not possess. A small shadow of jealousy fell across the path of his mind.

Again, what would all this mean to Amalickiah and his conspiracy if, as he had begun to suspect, a genuine conspiracy did exist? It was beyond doubt that Moroni knew something of it, and there was reason to believe that his demonstration of that day had been an outgrowth of that knowledge.

Was there a shadow of fear alongside the shadow of envy? Was it that which made it so hard all at once for Mulek to breathe? He did not know. He had never had any reason to know the meaning of fear, to experience its sensations. His wealth, his position, his personal charm had always been more than enough to keep him beyond the threat of any serious danger.

It was certain that he had not expected any such surprising development as Moroni's action when he began to associate himself with the treasonable project. Why had he listened to Amalickiah at all? For what does a man put himself into danger except the promise of reward? What reward could possibly come to him who neither needed nor desired anything he did not possess? The chance of losing much or everything was a heavy gamble indeed in comparison with the prospect of

mere entertainment and novelty.

When he reached home, Mulek was handed two letters that had come during his absence. Both surprised him and added to his agitation. One was from Amalickiah, urging his presence that very night at a designated spot, the very mention of which gave Mulek a severe shock. Something that had transpired, the traitor wrote, made this urgently necessary. Mulek, knowing now what this something was, went cold inside.

The scented communication that accompanied Amalickiah's court command brought, in its way, quite as much disquiet.

"Sweet Mulek, come to me immediately, not waiting for so much as a change of cloaks, for I have that to report which touches you closely. Sarah."

Mulek frowned, and a tremor shot through him. Events were piling up much too fast for his peace of mind, for his comprehension, in fact. He had long since ceased to wonder where the writer of that note learned all the things she knew. It was sufficient that she generally knew something worth his knowing.

"Come to me immediately." He would go. From there he could go directly to Amalickiah's secret meeting place.

If anyone on earth could move him to sudden action or prevail upon

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him to do that which he disliked, it was the writer of that second letter. While buckling on his sword, he was thinking about her, and as he thought, some of his worry left him. When he stepped out into the fresh air, he was filled with pleasurable anticipation.

He recalled vividly, as he walked toward her home, the circumstances under which he had first met her. There had been a party at one of his homes on the bank of the Sidon, a party at which had been in attendance all the youth and beauty of the city. Mulek's attentions for the moment had been directed toward a lovely black-haired little thing named Rebekah, who had already begun to lose her hold upon him, thus when Sarah appeared, in the company of a young sportsman from Manti, Mulek's interest was aroused.

Sarah had been in no way reluctant, and Rebekah, wholly devoted to Mulek, had seen him go away from her before her friends. Sarah, tall, slender, supple, and enticing, had turned the young man's head, and from that day he had had eyes for no other. Neither had given a moment's thought to Rebekah's shame and sorrow. In truth, Sarah had been as proud of her triumph over the woman as over the man.

As Mulek passed through the streets, he was surprised and disturbed at the number of flags he saw hanging from windows and balconies. Moroni's idea had certainly caught the imagination of the people.

He was kept waiting for a time in Sarah's house and became impatient, unable to account for the woman's failure to meet him at once. He was not accustomed to any diffidence on her part. Moreover, he had no time for delay on that night. Nor did he have any calmness to counsel patience.

Why did she not come?

When the woman entered, he almost gasped. Like mist before a wind his petulance disappeared. He had known she was attractive; he had not realized before how ravishing she could be, how altogether fascinating she could make herself appear when she so desired.

She was almost as tall as he. Her silken gown was the utmost in sim-

plicity. Her desirability hit him like a blow.

"You have taken advantage of me," he complained. "You bade me come as I was, yet I find you elegant. Is not that most unfair?"

"Do you like me so, Mulek?" she asked.

"More than anything else, as you already know."

"And I like you as you are. What more is there to be desired?" What could he answer to that? As he pondered, she went on, "Come and sit by me."

"Nay, Sarah," he answered with a show of determination. "I must be away at once." A hint of fear darkened the woman's face for an instant. Then she concentrated all her energies on the task at hand, hoping mightily that he would not notice her preoccupation, the tenseness of her manner.

"So soon?" she inquired. "Can you not even hear that which I have to say?" He went and sat by her, excusing himself with the pretext that the more he knew, the better able he would be to serve his cause.

"Be brief, I beg of you."

"Let us have a little wine before you depart." She passed him a container of amber liquid from the bottom of which tiny bubbles continually floated up. Mulek took it, poured himself and her a portion, and drank his. Had he been less deeply absorbed, he would have seen that she did not drink, and that some of the fear left her dark eyes.

She began then to talk of the happenings of the afternoon. Mulek was surprised to observe that although he had already heard the story, he somehow had not heard it. In no essential matter did her recital differ from that given by the stranger who had produced the first account of the day's doings, yet such was the originality of her feminine mind that her account was quite dissimilar. The aspects that the men had stressed she seemed almost entirely to have missed.

It was a fascinating version she gave. Mulek became so engrossed in Sarah's report of the actions of Moroni, that he quite forgot his haste to be gone. How he envied the man—not his talents but his opportunity! What would he, Mulek, not have done had he been in the other's place!

He did not realize it, but Sarah was literally putting her heart into her story. She spoke with vividness and clearness, quite without pretense or rhetoric. She was talking for that which meant more than anything else in the world for her. Just now it was time she needed, and the intensity of that need made her ache inside.

As she talked, she sipped lightly from her glass, and as she sipped, Mulek drank, more and more freely. Her nervousness by almost perceptible degrees passed off, and color came back into her cheeks, a smile to her carmine lips.

BEFORE LONG Mulek was intent only on Sarah's report and the burning liquid in his glass. He began to get sleepy, to nod. A deep flush overspread his face and forehead. He had something to do if only he could remember what it was. He began to mumble. His tongue was thick; his lips were dry. His eyes went shut, and his body limp. He was asleep.

It was only then that Sarah relaxed fully and smiled. She lowered his inert body to the couch and sighed with relief. To drug the wine of the most accomplished drinker in the land, the most discriminating palate, was no small achievement.

She looked down upon his unconscious form. His face flushed, his lips heavy and discolored, his nostrils distended, he was anything but a pretty sight, but to her he was infinitely precious.

Later that night she had him moved discreetly to his own house and his own great bed, and there he lay, while events of vast significance to him and all others were taking place, events in which he surely had thought to have a part.

Sarah knew she had taken a woman's way, not a man's, to keep him away from danger, and that he might hate her for it. It was a risk she had had to take. So long as he was alive, she would take her chances. She had acted deliberately. There had been no other way. To plead would have been futile; to command, foolish.

It had been a good night's work. Whether she would have cause to regret it, only the future could tell.

(To be continued)