

A SINNER BELOVED
A MORALITY PLAY AND PAGEANT

*Using the Book of the Prophet Hosea
as its imaginative basis*

By

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A SINNER BELOVED

THE MARKET-PLACE of the City of Samaria is a wide, irregular space, picturesque with awnings and flapping banners. Against a stretch of brown wall at the back is the *slave-dais*, a stepped platform of stone, worn into hollows by the feet of generations of bondservants.

THE TEMPLE OF ASHTORETH is to be thought of as a short way up the street to the left of the Market-Place. The city is to be thought of as principally off at the right.

At either side of the scene, framing it in, stands a high pillar, with a bowl of incense upon its capital. The incense in the left bowl burns darkly and smokily, with many sparks. The incense in the bowl at the right burns steadily, with a thin blue spiral of smoke.

THE CHARACTERS OF THE MORALITY ARE THESE:

1. THE SPIRIT OF WRATHFUL CONDEMNATION.
2. THE SPIRIT OF REDEMPTIVE LOVE.
(Symbolic, abstract figures of the Prologue and Epilogue).
3. THE PROPHET HOSEA. (Whose name means "Salvation").
4. GOMER, Daughter of Diblaim, His Errant Wife.

THEIR CHILDREN:

5. JEZREEL, the first-born, a Son (Whose name signifies "A Place of Blood").
6. LO-RUHAMAH, A Daughter. (Whose name means "No-More-Mercy").
She is later renamed Ruhamah ("Abiding Mercy").
7. LO-AMMI, the Little Boy. (Whose name means "Not My People").
He is later renamed Ammi ("Still My People").
8. GAAL, called The Adversary. Prophet-in-chief of Baal-Ashtoreth. (His name means "Abomination").
9. }
10. } TWO MERCHANTS
11. A BEDOUIN SHEIKH.
12. THE SELLER OF SLAVES.
People of Samaria, Idlers, Merchants, Householders, Votaries of Ashtoreth, etc., etc.

The Time is that of Jeroboam, the Son of Joash, King of Israel.

1.

PROLOGUE

The Prophet Hosea enters first. He is swathed from head to foot in a night-black cloak. He kneels upon the slave-dais: With eyes tight shut and hands tight-clenched, the Prophet prays.

The Spirit of Wrathful Condemnation enters. He is clothed in dull red and is armed with a scourge. He mounts the slave-dais and stands arrogantly upon it.

The Spirit of Redemptive Love enters. Clothed in white. He takes his stand below the steps of the slave-dais. He carries a cross-topped staff. The Spirit of Wrath and the Spirit of Love face each other over the bowed head of the Prophet, challengingly, antagonist-fashion.

THE SPIRIT OF WRATH: This man is mine.

THE SPIRIT OF LOVE: He shall not be for always.

WRATH: I rule him. His voice of prophecy is my voice.

LOVE: But even now, O Spirit of Wrathful Condemnation, his *heart* is not enslaved to thee. He speaketh words of bitter judgment on this sinning people; but beneath his words of angry judgment beateth the pulse of a good-will which belongeth unto me!

WRATH: I am the wrath of God; the flaming, ruthless indignation of an outraged Lord. His people hath broken its wedlock-covenant with Jehovah. It is an evil and a faithless generation. That nation unto which the One, True God had married Himself, hath iniquitously forsaken Him and turned to other Gods. Which are no gods. This people seeketh its adulterous, traitorous joy in ways Jehovah the Righteous abhorreth. Can there be aught but words of passionate resentment from on High? (*He brandishes the scourge above Hosea and commands:*) What saith the Lord, O Prophet of the Lord? Speak thou for me a word of wrath!

HOSEA: (*Kneeling with haggard face and halting voice*) Hear ye the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel; for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land; because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee. Seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children. Thou hast sowed the wind, and thou shalt reap the whirlwind. God will cast thee away. Thus saith Jehovah, thy covenant-God!

THE SPIRIT OF WRATH: This man is mine. His voice of prophecy is my voice.

LOVE: Nevertheless, O Spirit of Wrath, his *heart* is mine. His lips, mayhap, are thine to use, but they speak hollow words. This man hath no satisfaction in this his utterance. His *soul* is not thine abject slave, but free for God to claim and guide. And God shall give his heart to me!

WRATH: He speaketh Truth. Can God love a wanton sinner, defiant of truth unto his Lord?

LOVE: Can God take back a love once given?

WRATH: (*Whirling his scourge*). This Prophet of Jehovah's ire shall curse Israel in the name of Him who is all wrathful judgment.

LOVE: (*mounting the dias and speaking imperiously*) I have a controversy with thee, thou angry spirit. Down from this place of mastery. Thou shalt not have this man for thine own. I challenge thee, set this man free but one brief hour to be but himself, not thy bondsman and see whether he doth not choose me for his guide and guard. Forswearing thee. I challenge thee.

WRATH: So sure am I that only wrath is righteous I take thy challenge. Let him follow his instincts of God. See! (*He steps down from the platform*). I am not his enslaver. Naturally did he come to me, and by instinct will he cleave to me yet. He is free. Let what will come, come! You and I will wrestle for possession of his conscience, in the name of the God of his faith. His intuitions shall make the award. So be it! Amen!

LOVE: Amen and amen! So be it!

(*Hosea rises, steps down from the slave-dais, his loosening cloak revealing the white tunic beneath it. He stands straight, his arms outstretched. His face lifts. He speaks to Jehovah:*)

HOSEA: Oh Lord my God, there is no Saviour beside Thee. Teach me Thy thoughts!

(*The Spirit of Wrath steps down to the left pillar, with its smudge-fire atop, and sits at its base. He hangs his scourge on the pillar above his head. The Spirit of Love steps to the right-hand pillar, with its serenely-burning incense, and sits to watch. He leans his cross against the pillar. These two remain; symbolic, silent figures, watching all which now transpires.*)

Hosea goes to the extreme back (right) of the playing-space and seats himself, facing the Market-Place, watching.

A chorus of chanting voices somewhere to the right begins to sing:

"Show me Thy ways, O Lord; and teach me Thy paths.
Call to remembrance, O Lord, thy tender mercies and
Thy loving-kindnesses, which have been ever of old.

The secret of the Lord is among them that fear Him,
And He will show them His covenant.

Unto Thee, O Lord, will I lift up my soul; my God,
I have put my trust in Thee."

"Amen."

II.

THE INCIDENT

As Hosea sits watching, the frequenters of the market-place drift in. They gossip in groups, chaffer at the booths of the merchants; they eye the seated prophet and with one accord avoid him, ostentatiously.

"At the booth of a merchant (left-front) is a desert-sheikh, a-bargaining. Behind his hands he speaks to the two merchants serving him:

THE SHEIKH: Who is yon lonely man? And why do all the folk avoid him so?

THE FIRST MERCHANT: He is the Prophet Hosea.

THE SECOND MERCHANT: A scold, in the name, he says, of Jehovah.

THE FIRST MERCHANT: The sun does not seem to shine warmly wherever he is. We shiver when he comes.

THE SHEIKH: He is a Prophet of your God?

THE SECOND MERCHANT: If God is a God of cursing and vinegar vengeance.

THE FIRST MERCHANT: Yes, if.

THE SHEIKH: You have your doubts?

BOTH MERCHANTS: (*laughing*) We have.

THE SHEIKH: When one can choose so much more pleasant gods, it is lunatic to choose a God all of anger. I came past the grove of Ashtoreth but now: Ashtoreth seems to lack no worshippers. See, this garland was flung about my neck by two unveiled houris, who laughingly urged me to come back to today's revel. Their lips were very red,—and very warm!

THE FIRST MERCHANT: You tried them? (*Laughs.*) Why not?

THE SHEIKH: Somehow I pity this austere prophet. He looks yearningly at everyone who passes. He is lonely. What is his story? Do you know it at all?

THE FIRST MERCHANT: Oh, his story is an open scroll to all the city. From a boy the wing of misfortune has shadowed him. From the time when his father, who was a princeling of the tribe of Reuben, was carried off by the accursed Assyrians.

THE SECOND MERCHANT: His father died in exile, mourning the pricked bubble of his happiness.

THE FIRST MERCHANT: Hosea, fatherless and penniless, was sheltered by the "Sons of the Prophets" and was apprenticed to the Prophet's trade. Still almost a boy, he married just the girl he least should have chosen. A fly-away, quicksilver witch. Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, my cousin. "Scarlet Butterfly," we nicknamed her.

THE SECOND MERCHANT: She was once my playmate. Even then she claimed joy was her birthright. I remember how her eyes shone and her teeth flashed through her veil as she whirled in the dance to our drumming! (*He sighs*) Poor Gomer! Joy her birthright!

THE SHEIKH: Why do you sigh, friend? Might it be that you yourself would fain have been that birthright of joy to her?

THE SECOND MERCHANT: I admit it, O Sheikh of the Desert. But it was not to be.

Yet there was something about her seemed symbolic. She was ever our own desire for joy made incarnate. Her vivid lightheartedness was like our own desire made articulate.

THE SHEIKH: I will take all these. Wait a moment for my caravan-servants.

(*The Sheikh rises and beckons to his caravan-slaves. He loads them with what he has purchased and sends them to his camp. They exit left.*)

*(The Sheikh stands watching Hosea, while the merchants continue to answer him.)
(Returning to his questioning.)*

THE SHEIKH: You hint at a tragedy.

THE FIRST MERCHANT: It was bound to come. Was ever a pair so mismatched as that gloomy Prophet and blithe, perfumed Gomer!

THE SECOND MERCHANT: For breakfast, dinner and supper and all the time between, her brooding husband hoarsely rehearsed the sins of this nation. We had adulterously broken the wedlock-covenant twixt Jehovah and Israel. We had permitted the temples to Baal. We had devoted ourselves to Ashtoreth. With endless increase of exasperation he harped on the wrath of Jehovah.

THE FIRST MERCHANT: Can you imagine Gomer sitting and hearing his tirades with her spirit craving flowers and sleekness and dancing and gaiety?

THE SHEIKH: Were there children?

THE SECOND MERCHANT: Three, each pitiful child cursed with a name of God's bitterness.

THE SHEIKH: She ran away?

THE FIRST MERCHANT: The Scarlet Butterfly flew away. She sold herself for a song to Gaal the chief priest of Ashtoreth. He is mighty in the counsels of the King. Hosea calls him The Adversary.

THE SHEIKH: For gold and gaiety and garlands,—a life!

THE SECOND MERCHANT: So far we all know the sorry story. But no farther. Gomer disappeared out of the bondage of Gaal. We saw her in the groves of Ashtoreth for a few months. Then she vanished into thin air.

THE FIRST MERCHANT: Perhaps she is dead.

(There is a sudden tumult of cries outside the Market-Place. One can distinguish such taunts as these:

Go tell your father to change your cursing names!
Thus saith the Lord! Forsooth!
You three walking condemnations!
Jezreel, Jezreel!
Lo-Ruhamah! We shall see!
Get you gone from our sight!

(The playing-space is almost emptied as the people hasten out toward the sound.

Hosea leaps to his feet and starts toward the right, also, but the tumult quiets. He waits, perplexed and tense.

The three children of Hosea come running in, dodging behind cover when possible. Jezreel, the eldest, is guarding their retreat.)

JEZREEL: Well, we got away.

LO-RUHAMAH: There's father!

LO-AMMI: Father! Father!

LO-RUHAMAH: Now we're safe!

JEZREEL: Were you not safe with me?

(The children run to Hosea, who comes to meet them. They snuggle close to him, beneath his cloak. Except Jezreel who remains nervously alert, on watch.)

HOSEA: What is the trouble, lambkins?

(Breathlessly they answer, all at once:)

JEZREEL: They threw stones at us.

LO-RUHAMAH: They hate us so!

LO-AMMI: Why do they throw stones at us?

JEZREEL: Why do they hate us so! We are not to blame for our names.

LO-RUHAMAH: Everyone despises us, father. The boys and girls will never play with us.

JEZREEL: One would think we had the leprosy.

LO-RUHAMAH: We are very lonely, father.

JEZREEL: I hate our names as much as they do. *(Pointing right.)*

LO-RUHAMAH: Father dearest, if you did not love us I should want to die.

HOSEA: *(with a sudden gust of fierce tenderness. Kneeling and holding them tight.)* O my blessed, blessed children three, if I had not you to love, I, too, should want to die.

JEZREEL: *(stubbornly)* Then if you love us, father, why did you name us with names that are our daily curse?

LO-RUHAMAH: You try to tell us why. And although my mind understands a little, my heart never takes it in at all.

LO-AMMI: Do you know how hard it is to be lonely?

HOSEA: *(to himself, groaningly)* How hard it is to be lonely! O my God! *(There is a moment of silence.)*

JEZREEL: Father, I am grown up now,—or almost so. Can you prove to me your first-born, that you are right to name us so? *(Laughingly)* I have controversy with you. I challenge you!

(They take the few steps necessary to bring them to the slave-dais; and drop unthinkingly upon it, engrossed in their "controversy").

LO-RUHAMAH: Father, does hate do any good?

HOSEA: *(startled)* Daughter, I have begun to ask myself that question lately; and now you read my thoughts! Motherless brood o' mine, once I was ever so sure I knew God's true word. How could it be anything other than blazing wrath? See! Jehovah chose this nation for Himself. He only knows why; but He loved us and by the covenant married Himself to us. Blessing upon blessing would have been ours if this people had kept true to our share in the wedlock of spirit.

JEZREEL: *(bored, but tolerant)* I know all this by heart.

HOSEA: *(disregarding his son)* But woe unto us, we broke faith with Jehovah. We deserted Him. Look, children, there is the tower of Baal's great temple, the false God of things earthly. And beside its gate you can see the boughs of the Grove of Ashtoreth, his mate, sleek Goddess of Pleasure. You may not understand all this means, but at least you can comprehend our great sin:—we turned our backs on our God! We gave ourselves to the poisonous bondage of Creature-Content!

LO-RUHAMAH: Just as mother did to you, father!

HOSEA: (*leaping to his feet. Aghast.*) How did you come to know that? Who told you? I did not mean you to know. Have I not told you that the mother you loved is—dead? Dead, at least to us, dears. Probably dead in the flesh, too. God pity her! And us!

JEZREEL: We have known about mother for months.

HOSEA: How?

JEZREEL: Do you think the rabble hurls only stones at us?

LO-RUHAMAH: They hurl bitter taunts, too.

LO-AMMI: About mother.

JEZREEL: Stones do not bruise half so badly as sneers.

LO-RUHAMAH: About our mother.

JEZREEL: Father, we children do not believe she is dead. We cannot believe God will let her be dead.

LO-RUHAMAH: We were hunting for her today, as we do every day. Oh, just anywhere. When they set upon us. (*She gestures right.*)

HOSEA: Forgive me, my poor harried darlings. (*He stoops once more to their level.*) I thought but to save you the worst pain of all. The mother you loved is dead. She who lives (if she lives) you cannot love. We must renounce her.

LO-RUHAMAH: I am not able.

JEZREEL: You think you are acting as Jehovah acts with his people? And so we are named as we are?

HOSEA: My son, before the days of my sorrow—

LO-RUHAMAH: Is it not ours also?

HOSEA: Before the days of *our* sorrow I was bitter-sure. God could not but be angry that his covenant-mate had betrayed him. I must therefore proclaim His judgment of wrath. You, Jezreel, were my first-born. I vowed you from your girl-mother's arms to be a living word from on High. I named you Jezreel for that place of bloodshed where this kingship started. Your name was to be daily warning that a nation founded on bloodshedding cannot abide. Things grew worse. Baal and Ashtoreth gathered crowds of worshippers. More than Jehovah. The people sought indulgence and selfishness. Folk must have velvet cloaks, peacock fans, Nubian slaves, red-lipped dancers;—hearth-fires, hearty labor, clean-hearted prayer grew unfashionable. Even your mother fondled a necklace of emeralds as much as her baby. You came to her arms, little daughter. Despite her white-lipped pleading I named you too with a name of God's anger, Lo-Ruhamah; which is, being interpreted, "I will have no mercy, saith the Lord."

LO-RUHAMAH: It is a cruel name.

HOSEA: Next Gaal came. Gaal, mine Adversary. Gaal the arrogant and mighty; Prophet of Baal-Ashtoreth, advisor of the King. Silken and sleek like a panther. Ear-ringed, perfumed, thick of lip, lily-fingered. How persuasive he was!

JEZREEL: We have seen him. With throngs singing about him, scattering rose-petals. Going up thither. (*pointing left*).

HOSEA: The very day you were born, little son, Gaal won his fell victory; the King went with him to the Temple of Baal-Ashtoreth and offered his sacrifice there. Do you wonder I ruthlessly named this my child Lo-Ammi, "Ye are not my people and I will not be your God, saith Jehovah."

(*There is a moment of silence.*)

JEZREEL: And then?

HOSEA: (*with a break in his voice, despite himself*) Then? Then came the day when I returned to a house which *had* been a home and found three wailing babies—but no wife! (*He covers his face.*)

JEZREEL: The crowd says my mother sold herself to be the slave of Gaal. (*Hosea nods.*)

LO-RUHAMAH: What does Gaal's name mean?

HOSEA: (*between set teeth*) "Abomination."

JEZREEL: And rightly! (*With sudden heat*) I abhor and loathe him! I hate this people! GOD CURSE ALL SINNERS!

(*Hosea's eyes widen in horror and protest.*) He whispers: NO! NO! NO!

LO-RUHAMAH: Jezreel! Not curse our mother!

JEZREEL: Why not? She sinned. God hates all sin.

LO-RUHAMAH: But not all sinners. (*She stands beside Hosea, on tiptoe, her hand above his heart.*) Father!

HOSEA: My daughter?

LO-RUHAMAH: (*emphasizing every word*) TELL ME TRUE. DOWN DEEP IN THE BOTTOM OF YOUR HEART, YOU CANNOT HATE MY MOTHER, CAN YOU? I SEE SOMETHING IN YOUR EYES THAT SAYS YOU CANNOT. YES, EVEN THAT YOU LOVE HER STILL!

HOSEA: I DO. AND ALWAYS SHALL! I have tried to deceive myself. I have not acknowledged it even in my innest soul until this moment. But it is true. I love her, now and forever. No matter how I hate her sin, my heart is not mine but hers. To do with as she wills. She may betray me, loathe me, crucify me, but I shall go on loving her. I cannot help it, nor can she stop my loving her. I shall love her even in the depths of hell. By the right of inexorable, unremitting love I claim her. My love shall find her, win her, cleanse her, bring her back. She shall be mine again some day. My love, once given, cannot be retracted; it is not given on conditions. It is not mine, but hers, eternally. It must abide faithful even to her, unfaithful. Love is happiest so: to be just—loving! (*He is speaking really to himself.*)

LO-RUHAMAH: FATHER, ARE—YOU—BETTER—THAN—OUR—GOD?

HOSEA: (*gasping a bit*) Better than God? Better than God! Jehovah bless you, dearest, for that trusting logic. How blind I have been! God loves as I love! He loves His wedded people as I love Gomer, my wife! Of course! Faithfully, unremittingly, yearningly, redemptively! His love will save us! He Who is Love, cannot stop loving!

JEZREEL: Then our names are not true.

Lo-RUHAMAĖ: They can be changed.

HOSEA: They shall be.

(There is a clashing of cymbals, a blare of trumpets, and a turmoil of voices outside at the right. The crowd floods back into the Market-Place. First two trumpeters and two cymbal-players, marching sedately. Then the crier of Ashtoreth, between four standard-bearers. He intones between the trumpetings and clangors:)

THE CRIER: Ashtoreth awaits her votaries at the hour of sunset. Come ye, one and all, to her groves, at the hour of sunset. Laughter and revelry shall reign there, at the hour of sunset. Eat, drink and be merry with the Goddess of Gaiety. At the hour of sunset, in the groves of Ashtoreth.

(Behind the Crier comes a whirling tangle of priestesses. Dancing. Garlanded. Darting in and out among the people. The Crier stalks on and out toward the groves. Hosea steps to the front of the slave-dais and holds up his hand for silence.)

HOSEA: O my people!

(The crowd grows sullenly quiet.

ONE IN THE CROWD shouts:)

We are not thy people. Nor Jehovah's. You yourself say so!

HOSEA: O my people. Jehovah has spoken a new word in my ears. A renewing word. Of comfort. I have been wrong. I confess it. Jehovah hates your sins; His wrath is steadfast against our breaking of wedlock-covenant with Him; against harlotry of soul with false gods of earthly content.

(There is an angry murmur, but Hosea silences it with his lifted hand, and continues:)

But the word of the Lord comes unto me now that He does not hate you; He will not cast you off. He will have mercy. His love once given, He cannot take it back. He abides faithful, whether or no we keep our troth. We are sinners, but despite our sin, sinners beloved. Thus saith the Lord. *(There is obvious surprise in the crowd. And puzzled pleasure.)*

THE FIRST MERCHANT: This is a new Hosea.

THE SECOND MERCHANT: The prophet of a patient God may do much a scolding prophet cannot do.

HOSEA: Harken yet! When these my children were born, I named them with names of God's unsparing wrath, that they might be daily reminders of your condemnation. I, the slave of wrath, put them also in that bondage. Here we stand, on the slave-dais, until this hour beneath the scourge of the Spirit of Bitterness. Now in the sight of all the city I proclaim we are free. We are not the slaves of Anger henceforth; the God of Redemption has freed us. By love, which suffers long and is kind.

Therefore in the name of Jehovah, I re-name these children to be living symbols of hope.

Jezreel, your name shall remain Jezreel, but with a new meaning. Still for a shedding of blood, but the blood of redemption. I foresee it!

Lo-Ruhamah, your name shall be Ruhamah, "God will have mercy forever."

Lo-Ammi, little son, from this moment you shall be called Ammi, which means, "Always God's people."

And I, Hosea the Prophet, am not any more the slave of Bitterness, but a voice of God's travailing Love. In the name of Jehovah, I proclaim it.

God loves us still. I go to the shrine of Jehovah to make the offerings of a freeman before Him.

(There is a shout of approval, and a group in the crowd breaks into a chant. Hosea comes down from the dais, with his children. He leaves his black cloak on the slave-dais.)

THE CHANT:

Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord: Lord hear my voice.

If thou, Lord wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss; O Lord, who may abide it?

But there is mercy with Thee: therefore shalt Thou be feared.

I look for the Lord: my soul doth wait for him; in His word is my trust.

O Israel, trust in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy: and with Him is plenteous redemption.

And He shall redeem Israel from all His sins.

(While the chant is being sung, Hosea swings Ammi to his shoulder, and with a child on either side of him comes down through the people toward the front of the playing-space. His eyes are turned upward. He walks as if in a trance. Just as he turns toward the exit the slave-seller enters with certain slaves. Among them a woman in a flaming scarlet cloak. The slaves and Hosea pass within a few feet of each other. As they pass, the woman in red starts violently and suppresses a sob. Hosea does not see her. She takes an irresolute step toward him, stretches out a wavering hand of entreaty and yearning. But the seller of slaves sees this and pushes her none to gently back into line as he herds his slaves to the dais. The seller of slaves begins drumming. Then in rhythmical sing-song he intones his nasal refrain:)

Come buy you a slave!
Who is willingly sold
For something to eat,
For something to wear,
For somewhere to sleep,
For hiding his failure at Life.
Come buy you a slave.

Come buy you a slave!
With no will of his own.
With no life of his own.
With no soul of his own.
Come buy you a slave!

(The crowd gathers about the dais, most of the idlers sitting cross-legged on the ground. Not able to buy, but grateful for diversion; with all the time in the world on their hands.)

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: *(beginning his regular program)* My Lords, who carry purses heavy with gold and with jewels—

(There is a burst of laughter. A voice calls:)

A VOICE: If slaves were as cheap as field mice, we have no mites all together to buy even one!

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: *Is there no one here with purpose to buy?* These are unusual slaves—

THE CROWD SHOUTS: NO!

We haven't a shekel!

Sell her in the scarlet for a butterfly's wing and I'll buy her.

(Laughter all about.)

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: Swine of the gutters! Unclean! Dogs of the vale of Gehenna! Dare you make me ridiculous! I call down curses upon you. May Jehovah's wrath blast you—

A VOICE: (*jocularly*) Enough of that, you who are *not* a seller of slaves here today. The Prophet has a new word about that. Jehovah's wrath is not upon us after all. The Prophet forbids hate in the name of Jehovah. Be silent!

(*There is an awkward pause. The slave-seller does not quite know what to do. Off to the right are heard voices of a few men, singing the Hymn of Ashtoreth:*)

Day and night be merry!
Daily celebrate a feast!
Day and night be merry!
Ashtoreth! Ashtoreth!
Daughter of the moon!
Ashtoreth! Ashtoreth!
Ashtoreth! is our Heavenly Queen!

A VOICE: Gaal comes!

(*Gaal and his companions enter, dressed with festal gaiety. His companions carry standards. Gaal is a powerful, black-bearded Assyrian, clothed with sumptuous, bespangled silks and velvets. He is sleek, lithe, dominant. The crowd kneels as he comes.*)

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: O Gaal, Prophet and Priest of Baal-Ashtoreth, I do obeisance to you. You go to the temple? Is it presuming to ask whether there may be need of new slaves for the Groves?

GAAL: Seller of Slaves, we have no use for slaves such as yours. We do not buy slaves; our slaves give themselves to us. For baubles they think make them happy. They have their reward. The rose-garlands we bind on their necks lose their petals; iron chains are beneath the rose-petals. Why should I buy slaves when I can get all I want for a song and a laugh?

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: Nevertheless—sire—

GAAL: (*suddenly noting Gomer*) Wait! That woman wears the scarlet of Ashtoreth's slaves. Let her stand forth.

(*The slave-master pulls her forward and orders all the other slaves to the ground. Gomer clutches her cloak tight about her, muffling her face.*)

GAAL: Strip off that cloak!

GOMER: No! No! No!

GAAL: Let's see her face.

(*He strides forward and pulls the red cloak down from her face. Gomer stands with closed eyes, in agony of shame.*)

GAAL: Gomer!

THE CROWD: Gomer! Wife of the Prophet! Hosea's wife!

GAAL: Blessed be Ashtoreth! Gomer!! (*He gloats.*) Back from the dead. Runaway wife. Then runaway slave. Now on the slave-block once more!

(*He waits for her to answer. But she does not.*)

Ashtoreth brought you back. Back to my power. Back to the bondage you loathe. The lure of pleasure and softness and vanities brought you back!

GOMER: (*slowly, looking him squarely in the eyes*) Gaal, you lie. I came back only to steal some secret glimpse of my children. I had to see them or die. Love brought me back—

GAAL: They do not love you. They have forgotten you—(*insultingly*) you who are dead.

GOMER: My love is not dead. It is all there is of me that lives (*to herself*). And that cannot die.

GAAL: And as for Hosea, the Prophet, who once was your husband—

GOMER: Before you poisoned my peace.

GAAL: As for your husband, he has hardened his heart. You are a leper to him.

GOMER: I am neither asking nor hoping that anyone should love me. But no one can hinder my loving whom I will.

GAAL: You are coming back to the bondage of Ashtoreth.

GOMER: I am not.

GAAL: I can buy you for the price of a sparrow.

GOMER: Gaal, once and for all understand me. There was once a time, to be sure, when I craved self-indulgence. I yearned for a carefree, silken existence. To the music of languorous laughter, immune from all duties. You justified to me my vapid desires with your pagan scorn of all seriousness. You sneered my conscience to silence. You offered a Paradise of the earth, earthly, just for the gift of myself to Ashtoreth. The grieving anger of Hosea angered me. I fled to the grove of Ashtoreth. And to you!

GAAL: (*laughing contemptuously*) I remember that spider-web day.

GOMER: But you kept no Paradise-promises. You walled me into a world all of petty jealousy, seussuousness, cruelty, hypocrisy. Softness turned hard. You starved my real life. I was chained to the wine-press. I realized at last This was Sin I had sinned. I was a prodigal. I had died. Yet what did you care? You sneered at my bitter awakening and laughed at my desolateness. But there came a midnight of miracle. My will struggled through death to enough resurrection to claim its freedom from you and from yours. I came to myself. Yes, even by the pains of the hell of my disillusioning I was freed from it. My longings at least were at liberty. You were no longer Master of me. Stumbling, blindly, groping, breathless I fled from the Nightmare of You.

(*Quietly*) I may never again be loved. But I am free to love whom I will. Without thought or hope of return, my soul belongs to those whom I cannot help loving. Humbly, penitently, patiently, selflessly. I give them all I have, all I am, whether they know it or care.

(*Strongly again*) You may trammel my body once more. You may think you enslave me again. But, O Gaal the Adversary, harken to me. YOU HAVE NO POWER AT ALL OVER ME. YOU MAY CHAIN MY BODY TO A TREADMILL OF PAIN; YOU MAY STRETCH MY FLESH ON THE RACK; YOU MAY CRUCIFY THIS MY BODY; BUT—YOU—CANNOT—TOUCH—ME! YOU CANNOT REACH MY WILL. YOU CANNOT LAY HANDS ON MY SPIRIT. YOU CANNOT KILL MY LOVE. I WILL DO WHAT I WILL WITH MY SOUL. I AM SCATHELESS OF YOU: HEAVEN-HIGH ABOVE YOUR UTMOST GRASP. MY LIFE IS MY OWN; I WILL FORTH-GIVE MY SELF AS I CHOOSE AND YOU CANNOT COME NEAR ME TO STOP ME.

GAAL: But—Gomer—I—I—

GOMER: *(she laughs—exultant)* GOD PITY THE RIDICULOUS FAILURE YOU ARE. I AM FREE OF YOU AS THE WIND; I GO WHERE I LIST. YOU ARE DEFEAT! I AM VICTORY! YOU ARE SLAVERY: I AM LIBERTY! YOU ARE EARTH: I AM SOUL! FOR I LOVE!

(Gomer stops for very breathlessness. And just as she pauses, Hosea enters, with his children. Ammi again on his shoulder. Hosea sees Gomer. His face blanches. His hand goes to his heart. He and Gomer look steadily into each other's eyes, over the heads of the awed crowd. Then Hosea turns his gaze to Gaal. His jaw tightens. He sets his little boy down and steps to where Gaal stands. He confronts him—in silence.)

GAAL: *(narrowing his eyes)* Yonder is a runaway harlot for sale.

HOSEA: She is my wife.

(The children run to Hosea. Eagerly but waiting his word.)

GAAL: She was your wife.

HOSEA: I said, *She is* my wife, Gaal.

JEZREEL: *(to his father)* On the slave-block!

RUHAMAH: Father, can we buy her back? Do you want her?

(Hosea wordlessly answers.)

(It comes to Gomer what Hosea means to do.)

GAAL: *(to the slave-seller)* I bid for this woman.

HOSEA: Gaal, mine Adversary, you shall not have her.

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: *(unctiously)* How much will my lords bid?

HOSEA: I am a poor man, well-nigh penniless, but I will give every whit I possess. Fifteen pieces of silver, and an homer of barley and an half homer of barley, all my substance. With all my living I would redeem her whom I love.

GAAL: *(laughing)* Fifteen pieces of silver and an homer of barley and an half-homer of barley! By the laughter of Ashtoreth's red lips, how absurd! Here, Seller of Slaves, here is a spare-bag of gold pieces. Give me the woman.

THE SLAVE SELLER: Money is money.

(The children break through the crowd, and throw themselves upon Gomer, who clutches them close, kissing them as though famished.)

HOSEA: *(turning to the people)* Listen, my people. Shall a bag of gold pieces prevail against God? Money is not only money. It means what it means. Gaal's gold is easily spared: it has none of the worth and the power of sacrifice. My few silver pieces are my veriest life. Gaal's gold is the curse of Ashtoreth. My silver is the smybol of redemptive love from on High. Shall mine adversary buy Jehovah's child from Him with a bag of gold dirt from the hoard of Ashtoreth?

(The crowd breaks into a pandemonium of shouts. The Merchants leading.)

Give Hosea his wife!

Gaal shall not have her!

Hosea outbids his enemy

No good luck will be yours, if you give her to Gaal!

She is Hoesa's by right!

(The slave-master hesitates. He reaches out a tentative hand toward Gaal:)

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: I dare not sell her to you. I am afraid. *(speciously).* And besides, I cannot sell her soul. She has told you that she is free of you, whatever befalls.

GAAL: There is my bag of gold. Be common-sense. Stop this lunacy. Give me the woman. My gold is worth more than this idiot prophet of Jehovah can offer.

(The crowd breaks out again.)

It is not!

What is a bag of gold!

There goes no life with the bag of Gold!

Slink away, Gaal! Begone!

Let the man have his wife!

GAAL: *(fronting the crowd)* Baal-Ashtoreth curse you!
(He reaches for Gomer. The three children leap to defend her.)

RUHAMAH: She belongs to us who love her.

JEZREEL: God gives her to us!

AMMI: You shall not touch my mother.

HOSEA: Seller of Slaves. You dare not defy redemptive love. *(Pointing to his children)* Jehovah is in it. He has spoken.

GAAL: *(Baffled; turning in his rage to the Slave-seller.)* Decide!

THE SELLER OF SLAVES: I cannot. *(seeking desperately for an expedient, he exclaims:)* I set her free. She may go as she wills. And whither she chooses.

(The Crowd bursts into angry tumult against Gaal, hooting him out of the Market Place!)

GOMER: Jehovah! My Saviour! My Redeemer!

(Hosea reaches up and takes Gomer's hand. He aids her from the slave-dias. But when he would draw her to him, she slips through his arms and kneels, covering her face. Gaal and his companions slink out—left.)

GOMER: I am a sinner.

HOSEA: But a sinner beloved. Free of your bondage.

GOMER: Hosea, my husband! Your name is rightly "Salvation."

HOSEA: O Gomer my wife! Jehovah has taught me His love through my own. I cannot but claim you, for always.

(He raises her, kisses her reverently on the forehead, and turns to the people whom he had forgotten.)

All this has happened here in your sight. Perhaps it is ordained of God for a witness of Him. Return to Jehovah. He has not ceased from loving you. For He cannot thus stop. He is our Redeemer,—by unwearying love.

(Someone in the crowd begins to sing:)

"O Lord thou hast searched me and known me: thou knowest my down-sitting and mine uprising: thou understandest my thoughts long before."

(The crowd rises and joins in the chant, marching out presently toward the Temple of Jehovah.)

If I climb up into Heaven, thou art there: If I do down to hell thou art there also.

If I take the wings of the morning and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea

Even there also shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, peradventure the darkness shall cover me; then shall my night be turned into day.

Try me, O God, and seek the depths of my heart; prove me and examine my thoughts.

Look well, if there be any way of wickedness in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen.

III.

EPILOGUE

(As the crowd leaves the Market-Place the Spirit of Wrathful Condemnation rises. Also the Spirit of Redemptive Love. As the chant dies away they speak to each other across the playing space.)

THE SPIRIT OF WRATHFUL CONDEMNATION: This man is thine.

THE SPIRIT OF REDEMPITIVE LOVE: But not mine alone.

WRATH: He loveth—

LOVE: He loveth human souls. But therefore he hateth—

WRATH: The sins which enslave them.

LOVE: With an unwearying, holy hatred for sins—

WRATH: And with an unwearying, holy love for souls.

LOVE: Give him thy scourge. To cleanse the Temple of Life of Abominations.

WRATH: Give him thy cross. To lay down his life. For his friends.

TOGETHER: Prophecy for us, thou whose name is Salvation.

HOSEA: *(With his arm about his wife and the children grouped about them)*

Thus saith the Lord thy redeemer:

I will heal thine iniquities. I will love thee freely, O Israel.
I will allure thee and speak comfortably unto thee. I will betroth thee to me forever; yea I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness and in judgment and loving-kindness and in mercies.
I will betroth thee to me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord. I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people, and they shall say, Thou art my God. And it shall be that day, saith the Lord, that thou shalt call me my husband. Thus saith the Lord, thy Redeemer.

The people, outside break into the Gloria.

Glory be to the Father
And to the Son
And to the Holy Ghost—
As it was in the beginning,
Is now,
And ever shall be,
World without end.
Amen.