



From THE PROPHET'S WIFE

By Milton Steinberg

WITH THE APPROACH OF EACH FESTIVAL, Beeri's household went into a fever of uncertainty. How would the master decide this time? Would he elect to disregard the risks of an attempt at blood vengeance by Achimelech's kin by traveling to Jezreel so that he might worship the Lord in the high place at which his fathers had worshiped before him? Or would his fears bind him to the safety of Samaria and the altars sacred to the Lord in that city, even though they were not his own? Or might he resolve to render the offerings of his lips at some ancient, storied shrine, as he had in his earlier years, when he was both more vigorous in body and less burdened by a large and prospering household?

Among these possibilities, Beeri's household hesitated during the sacred time of the first fruits, the harvest, and at the great New Moon in the autumn. But not at Passover, the one festival most properly celebrated in the

family homestead. For whence should the paschal lamb be taken except from one's own flocks, and whence the grain for unleavened bread save from one's own granaries? Besides, did not the stems of new barley await their master that he might select a sheath, mark it, cut it with his own scythe, thresh and winnow it, so that an omer of it could be brought each day for forty-nine days in thanksgiving to the Lord?

In all years then, even those of Gadiel's death and Iddo's flight, the household traveled from Samaria down to the valley of Jezreel, a procession of six ox-drawn carts groaning under their bundles of goods, on top of which sat the women and young children. On either side of the procession were the bondsmen and sturdier maidservants who went afoot, as well as Beeri, Talmon, Hosea, and many of the more honored free laborers.

The journey was pleasurable or difficult, depending on family circumstances, the state of the weather, and the condition of the roads. The first spring after Iddo left, every heart brooded over the past and dreaded to look on familiar scenes from which two familiar faces and figures would be missing. As though out of fellow feeling, that winter had been unseasonably prolonged, so that the skies were grim, rain fell in solemn persistence, and a chill wind blew gustily. The roads were morasses in which the wagons mired time and again. The entire cavalcade seemed more a funeral than a festival procession.

But for the third Passover after Iddo's flight, when Hosea had passed his sixteenth birthday and was considered

a man soon to be apprenticed to Noam the Naphtalite, every circumstance conspired for joyfulness, both on the road they traveled without obstacle and at the homestead at which they arrived in safety.

The sorrows of Beerli were by now old sorrows, somewhat mellowed. The spring was in him with a sweet potency that lifted the heart and brought song to the lips. The sky was so blue and breathtakingly high that it seemed not a heaven but in its exceeding loftiness a veritable heaven of heavens. The wind, blowing in long, even breaths was so strong in scent that all turned slightly giddy from the inhaling of it. And flowers were spread over the ground—crocuses, anemones, irises, and lilies—glowing and dancing in their many colors, looking like the jewels of some Canaanite trafficker, set against a cloth to show them off against the solid green of grass, solid green since there was no brown or barren spot anywhere.

At each dusk during that season, the world put away its daytime adornment of flowers, slowly and with reluctance, and put on, one by one, the spangles of hugely lavish, almost garish, displays of stars. The wind blew at twilight as strongly perfumed as before, save that it took on the coolness of a chilled wine and was moist as if with the vapor that condenses on a polished bowl. And night by night, the moon, which had been just newly born when the household came to Jezreel, grew prodigiously as the Passover approached and rose higher in the sky with each shining forth, until by the eve of the festival it was at the full, standing round and bright yellow overhead.

In its light, tables were spread in the courtyard of Beeri's homestead, as in every household in Israel and Judah in which men and women revered the Lord. A great fire was kindled for the roasting of the paschal lamb, which had been slaughtered at dusk, and a feast was made of its meat, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Then, as they sat in the mingled light of the moon and the flames, still eating and drinking the wine, Beeri related to them the tale of Egyptian bondage and of the miraculous deliverance, after which they sang hymns of praise deep into the night.

On the next morning there began the annual "walking out" of the youths and virgins, of their going abroad in the fields and on the roads; addressing one another freely as was proper only two times a year, on the Passover and on the Festival of Booths; singing songs of love one to another and looking each to see who was fair and winsome.

Most of the young men went about in bands, as did the maidens also, compromising so between unconfessed eagerness and equally unconfessed timidity. Those whose hearts were already set on one person walked alone, as did those who were friendless, or so shy as to cringe at the company even of their own kind.

Such was Hosea. He knew no one whose company he might seek out freely and without embarrassment, his long absences from the valley having broken his acquaintance with other youths of like station. And such a flight of emotions had been awakened in him by the anticipation of walking forth—reluctance and ardor, desire, curiosity, and

bashfulness—that he feared the presence of anyone by his side, lest he betray himself.

On the first morning, therefore, he went forth alone. Lacking boldness, he wandered side paths on the outskirts of the groves and fields rather than the main roads and other places where young people foregathered. He saw them from afar, heard their songs and laughter, and yearned, but did not dare, to approach them. Occasionally he encountered other youths as solitary as he, and once he encountered a maiden, a not uncomely maiden to whom he would have spoken. But she was hurrying toward the town and had brushed him by before he found words.

In his loneliness the day dragged for him, all the more painfully because he was aware of its passing and the slipping away of its promise. At its end he trudged home, heavy at heart.

Had he some pretext, he would not have gone forth at all the next morning. But a wine jug and a generous luncheon packed in a pouch had been set out for him at the doorway of his chamber. And he could not bring himself to face the mockery of the entire household which certainly would descend on him, and for a long time, were he to loiter at home. With studied nonchalance, therefore, he donned festive attire once more, raised the skirts of his mantle, pulling it up through the girdle so as to free his legs for walking, swung the pouch over his shoulder, and lifted the jug into the crook of his other arm. Calling casual farewells to all within hearing, he sauntered off. As he did so, a resolution which had been forming in him

crystallized. He would not visit the places where youths and maidens congregated. Not again would he skulk about, looking and yearning from afar. Better to pass the day as best he might in solitude in some spot where no one would come upon him, amusing himself in whatever fashion he could until the dusk descended and it was safe to turn homeward. So at the least his pride would be spared and he would not be sickened at heart again with disappointment and self-reproach.

But though he struck off in the direction of the hills, he found himself drawn, despite himself, toward the town. He did not allow himself to venture inside, but neither did he go so far from it as to be beyond all hope of some happy chance encounter. He compromised by settling himself in an open space in a vineyard, as close to the midway point as he could determine between his home and the fields and paths where the other young people walked.

The hours did not go quickly. Having nothing else to do, he was compelled to invent matters, childish matters, with which to concern himself. He studied the vine leaves with painstaking and prolonged care, examining the network of veins, the mottled light and arc of the tissue. He watched a colony of ants at work. In the end, unable to think of an alternative, he took to staring up into the sky through half-closed lids, admiring the mysterious little luminous shapes that floated in and out of his vision. Hypnotized by the play of light and shadow, lulled by the whisper of the wind in the leaves, and somnolent with the mounting heat of day, he drifted into a half trance in

which all thought and all awareness of time were blessedly swallowed up.

A shadow fell across his face, startling him into consciousness. He sat bolt upright, blinking up at a young woman's figure silhouetted against the sky.

He scrambled to his feet and set nervously to making himself presentable, brushing the dust from himself, pulling at the skirts of his mantle, all the time volunteering hastily invented and broken phrases for fear that the truth about his solitude be guessed. "I grew weary...all my friends..."

The girl's voice seemed strained, as from anger. "May I be your partner today?"

He wished, but could not bring himself, to say yes.

"Then you are not alone?" she continued after a moment, misconstruing his silence. "You have friends for whom you are waiting? I watched for a while and saw no one...forgive me...." She shrugged ruefully and turned to leave.

"Don't go," he interposed, hastening to stop her. "I am alone...."

"But your friends!"

He hesitated on the verge of lying again, but, being calmer now, he lacked the will.

"I have no friends," he confessed, "I did not tell the truth to you. I am alone."

She tossed her head defiantly. "As am I."

From his first startled glimpse of her, he had been aware that she was pretty. But now she suddenly appeared to him breathtakingly lovely.

Her hair was a swirl of very dark waves about her head, a cascade tumbling down her shoulders. The smooth olive of her skin was deep with sunburn and touched with the blush of her blood. Her eyes burned black under eyebrows that glared upward as though about to take flight. Her nose was not thin and her mouth was full, but there were hollows under her high cheekbones which lent delicacy and wistfulness to her face. She was tall for a girl, her eyes on a level with his. And there was in her an intensity which made her seem gloriously alive.

“You?” he wondered, “Why should you be alone?”

She struggled between shame and indignation.

“Because,” she burst forth, “because the other girls will not walk with me, saying that I am a nobody. And the boys, when I go along with them, are over bold, mindful that with me they need fear neither a father nor brothers, since I am an orphan and alone. And because of this.”

She swept the fingertips of both her hands down her sides, calling his attention to her robe, which he observed was threadbare, faded, and ragged at the fringes.

“And because of this,” she went on in mounting passion, putting forth a bare, dust-stained foot. “It is not enough that I must appear in rags to be mocked at by all the world. I must also go without sandals so that I cannot even dance.”

At this, he recognized her.

“Why, you are Gomer, Gomer the niece of Charun and the daughter of...”

“Diblain,” she supplied. “And you?”

“You do not know me?” he questioned, first touched by disappointment and then telling himself that he could not expect her to recognize him, as he had not recognized her. “We have met often before, but long ago. I am Hosea....”

She looked at him blankly.

“Hosea,” he repeated, “Beer’s son.”

“Of course,” she cried, “Hosea, Iddo’s brother. Where is Iddo? Is he still among the Philistines? Do you hear from him?”

“Not often, and then indirectly, as when some traveler comes from Ashkelon. That is where he is. He has become a captain of fifty of the palace guard of the city’s seron.”

For a long moment she said nothing, and while he waited, the misgiving beset Hosea that she would turn to leave.

“Will you eat with me? I have enough for two, for a whole company indeed,” he stammered. “And it is not pleasant to be alone.”

“Do I not know it,” she replied solemnly.

“And you need not stay all day,” he assured her, “though I would like it. You may go on whenever...”

She looked into his face. Whatever remained of sullenness in her face vanished in a swift, warm smile. “No, it will either be all day as I suggested when I first spoke to you or nothing. Which, I pray you, will you have?”

It was noon. His heart leaped with relief, with an onslaught of pleasure.

“To the very dusk,” he said.

They turned at once to the pouch, undid its fastenings, and explored its contents—the cakes of unleavened bread, the meats wrapped in a cloth, the dried figs, dates, and nuts.

“This is a feast,” she said. “One such as Solomon the king might have eaten.”

They fell to zestfully, eating eagerly and steadily, and drinking from the jug as they ate, passing it back and forth whenever one or the other thirsted. The wine was, on Beer’s prudent instruction, well-diluted, but it was refreshing and had enough strength that, even if fleetingly, Hosea was partially liberated from his usual difficulty of speech. He talked with a spontaneity and articulateness which surprised and delighted Gomer, especially when he told her of Samaria, the multitudes who lived there, and the magnificence of its palaces and temples.

As he sobered from the wine, however, his speech faltered once more. She noticed that his courage began to fail him. He groped for things to say, lapsing into intervals of silence, from which he emerged into hesitant speech, only to slip back again with an ever heavier sense of anxiety and inadequacy.

Gomer was not without understanding. She suppressed any impatience she may have felt, and, whenever some period of quiet became intolerable or his inner anguish too painful, she tried to help him. As one supplies to a stammerer a word for which he struggles, she asked him leading questions.

But it was all slow and dull; she wished so very much that she were elsewhere that in the end her capacity for

pretense was exhausted. She continued to sit, her face turned toward him as though she were all attention. But her fingers toyed with a twig, twisting and untwisting it interminably. Her eyes were either averted or, when she looked at him, vacant. Eventually, she stopped taking any part whatsoever in the conversation. Watching her furtively, anxiously, he came at last to the point at which he could no longer conceal from himself that she was bored. Despair overcame him. He gave up and fell as silent as she.

How long they sat wordless together he did not know, plunged as he was in a hopeless lethargy. But somehow, suddenly, he was aware of her again. And he was seeing her, all at once, not as someone who might leave him at any moment and whom he must strive to detain, nor as one with whom he must make conversation, no matter how difficult, but simply as one to be looked at and be marveled over for beauty. She was seated near him with her head somewhat bowed and her averted face visible only in profile. He had been lying on his side, his head propped up on an angled arm, his gaze fixed idly on the ground, his consciousness deep in the great, colorless tide of his loneliness. A moment later, nothing had changed except that his eyes had been raised.

He stared at her. His sight invaded and lost itself in the waves and curls of her hair. Recovering, it traced the clean line from her forehead to her chin; returned to her generous lips, where it paused for a trembling moment; wandered down her arms to her long, thin fingers, busy

with the twig; retraced its way upward and forward as to round the swelling curve of her breast; then drew quickly away, returning to her face, where it found rest for a long interval on her lips, then on her long-lashed, lowered eyes.

A sweet tremulousness was born in him, a half-pleasurable, half-painful sensation in his chest.

She raised her eyes. He was too absorbed and lost to think of averting his own. Their glances locked.

“You are very beautiful,” he murmured, speaking without forethought or self-consciousness.

She flushed at the compliment, a dark tide flowing upward in her face. Instantly he blushed too for the daring of his utterance, the openness of his self-disclosure.



THE NEXT DAY, SHE DID NOT COME. He loitered away the interminable hours, alternately seething with indignation against her, though she had not bound herself to spend this day with him when he had proposed it the afternoon before, and aching, first with hope and finally with dull despair.

But on the third day, she returned. There was in her something of surliness, as though she had come reluctantly. But he was too joyous to sense her mood, not that he would have understood its import if he had. It was enough for him that his anxiety had proved false. She had come, and a long day stretched before them. This time, he was not unprepared for her arrival. Through the two long

nights since they had first met, he had planned carefully their next encounter, what he should talk about to her and how he should express it.

It did not go quite as smoothly as he had designed. His words were not as fluent as he had intended, nor was she so interested as he had hoped in the matters of which he spoke—his studies, for example, or the scribe's craft which he was to learn from Noam the Naphtalite. But it went much better than on the first occasion. There were matters which fascinated her. And at no time was there a recurrence of those long, awkward silences during which his heart perished for want of what to say and her thoughts wandered off where they would.

Thereafter they met each day, Hosea invariably arriving first, she coming tardily and always with a sullenness which did not disappear until the morning was far advanced, and which was liable to return whenever the conversation lagged. Occasionally she withdrew into herself and her private, unhappy concerns.

It was never so between them that they were altogether at ease. But there were periods in which both of them chatted spontaneously, gaily, and lightly of heart.

Meantime his admiration for her mounted steadily. He did not again bespeak his wonder of her. But each day she seemed more beautiful.

He became aware of details of her loveliness, the flash of her teeth when she smiled, the tapering slenderness of her fingers, the faintest dimple in her chin. He became conscious of her intriguing mannerisms, the way laughter

welled up in her throat, the huskiness of her voice, the proud toss of her head, the volatile quickness of her mood.

All these he found pretty and appealing. But as he came to know her better, he discovered other traits which disturbed him. One was that she was not overly devout. It had been when they were ransacking the pouch for their first luncheon. As they examined their treasure, she cried out in playful regret:

“What, no parched corn in honey? I had been hoping there would be some. It is my favorite dainty.”

“Oh, no,” he answered. “Have you forgotten that parched corn is suspect as leaven and may not be eaten on these days?”

“I had forgotten that. And I had forgotten too that in your household such customs are strictly observed.”

“But is it not so also in your home, Charun’s home?” He was more than a little shocked.

“No leavened *bread*. But for the rest, Charun, my uncle, is not overzealous for the details of the law. He will eat and give us to eat of parched corn, and even of beans and peas, holding that these are not the leaven of grain. And I must say that I agree with him. It is one thing to eat outright leaven such as bread; that, everyone agrees, is unlawful. Besides, it is not safe, for a man and his household may be cut off from the family of Israel if they are discovered doing so. But all these other little rules, they are so difficult. Besides, what purpose do they serve? Will it matter to the Lord?”

As with ritual, so he suspected with other matters.

Never, when he referred to the Lord and the teachings of Moses, did she say anything in response. And whenever he mentioned the principles taught him by his father regarding dealings between man and man, she would merely look at him, a cryptic smile on her lips.

Also, she disturbed him from time to time with a bitterness of mood which welled up in her. She was capable of speaking harshly and angrily of people, of flaring into angers against them as though they had done her some personal wrong.

But these were to him but the momentary disturbances, the ruffles of a smoothly flowing delight in her.

And they were completely wiped out of his consciousness by the wondrous incident which befell on the last day of their walking out, on the seventh day of the festival.

The place of their meeting, isolated by vines and terrace walls, could not be seen from the road. But sounds carried from it, so that they always heard the noises made by passers-by—the clank of sodden hoofs on the stones, the babble of voices, the whistling of a lone boy playing his pipe, fragments of conversation.

On this last day of the festival, a band of youths and maidens, accompanied by musicians trooping up the hill, stopped at a level place in the roadway and began first to sing and then to dance.

The words and the melodies carried to Hosea and Gomer clearly, and even more clearly there came the rhythm, beaten on a drum and tabrets.

Gomer's eyes lit up.

"Come, Hosea, let us dance."

"But I cannot," he protested.

"Cannot? Iddo's brother not be able to dance?"

"Oh, I can," he admitted, "but I do not do it well."

She coaxed, but he was too unsure of himself to give in. At last, as much to free himself from her beseeching as for any other reason, he said to her, "Do you dance for both of us, dance for me."

"Would you truly desire to see me dance?"

As she asked the question, he knew all at once that there was nothing he desired more.

"Yes," he whispered, "I would."

Gomer rose from the ground on which they were sitting. Lifting her head so that her face was turned upward to the sky and her hair flowing free of her back, she raised her arms as if holding tabrets. She then began to turn and sway before him.

He looked up at her and saw not her face, at which he had always looked heretofore, but her body. As he noticed the slenderness of her ankles, the length of her legs, the curved aliveness of her thighs and waist, and the fullness of her bosom, fire flared in him. It was clear to him as a springtime day. He loved her.