

Hands Off

By Edward Everette Halle

It was in another stage of existence. I was free from the limits of Time, and in new relations to Space.

Such is the poverty of the English language that I am obliged to use past tenses in my descriptions. We might have a verb which should have many forms indifferent to time, but we have not. The Pyramid Indians have.

It happened to me to watch, in this condition, the motions of several thousand solar systems all together. It is fascinating to see all parts of all with equal distinctness—all the more when one has been bothered as much as I have been, in my day, with eyepieces and object-glasses, with refraction, with prismatic colors and achromatic contrivances. The luxury of having practically no distance, of dispensing with these cumbrous telescopes, and at the same time of having nothing too small for observation, and dispensing with microscopes, fussy if not cumbrous, can hardly be described in a language as physical or material as ours.

At the moment I describe, I had intentionally limited my observation to some twenty or thirty thousand solar systems, selecting those which had been nearest to me when I was in my schooling on Earth. Nothing can be prettier than to see the movement, in perfectly harmonic relations, of planets around their centers, of satellites around planets, of suns, with their planets and satellites, around their centers, and of these in turn around theirs. And to persons who have loved Earth as much as I have, and who, while at school there, have studied other worlds and stars, then distant, as carefully as I have, nothing, as I say, can be more charming than to see at once all this play and interplay; to see comets passing from system to system, warming themselves now at one white sun, and then at a parti-colored double; to see the people on them changing customs and costumes as they change their light, and to hear their quaint discussions as they justify the new and ridicule the old.

It cost me a little effort to adjust myself to the old points of view. But I had a Mentor so loving and so patient, whose range—oh! it is infinitely before mine; and he knew how well I loved Earth, and if need had been, he would have spent and been spent till he had adjusted me to the dear old point of vision. No need of large effort, though! There it was, just as he told me. I was in the old plane of the old ecliptic. And again I saw my dear old Orion, and the Dipper, and the Pleiades, and Corona, and all the rest of them, just as if I had never seen other figures made from just the same stars when I had other points of view.

But what I am to tell you of is but one thing.

This guardian of mine and I—not bothered by time—were watching the little systems as the dear little worlds flew around so regularly and so prettily.

Well, it was as in old days I have taken a little water on the end of a needle, and have placed it in the field of my compound microscope. I suppose, as I said, that just then there were several thousand solar systems in my ken at once—only the words “then”, “there,” and “once,” have but a modified meaning when one is in these relations. I had only to choose the “epoch” which I would see. And of one world and another! had vision equally distinct—nay, of the blush on a girl’s cheek in the planet Neptune, when she sat alone in her bower. I had as distinct vision as of the rush of a comet which cut through a dozen solar systems, and loitered to flirt with a dozen suns.

In the experience which I describe, I had my choice of epochs as of places. I think scholars or men of scholarly tastes, will not wonder when I say that in looking at our dear old Earth, after amusing myself for an instant with the history of northern America for ten or twenty thousand of years, I turned to that queer little land, that neck between Asia and Africa and that mysterious corner of Syria which is north of it. Holy Land, men call it, and no wonder. And I think, also, that nobody will be surprised that I chose to take that instant of time when a great caravan of traders was crossing the isthmus—they were already well on the Egyptian side—who had with them a handsome young fellow whom they had bought just above, a day or two before, and were carrying down south to the slave market at On, in Egypt.

This handsome youngster was Yussuf Ben Yacoub, or, as we say, Joseph, son of Jacob. He was handsome in the very noblest type of Hebrew beauty. He seemed eighteen or nineteen years old: I am not well enough read to know if he were. The time was early morning. I remember even the freshness of the morning atmosphere, and that exquisite pearliness of the sky. I saw every detail, and my heart was in my mouth as I looked on. It had been a hot night, and the sides of the tents were dewed up. This handsome fellow lay, his wrists tied together by a cord of camel's hair which bound him to the arm of a great Arab, who looked as I remember Keokuk of the Sacs and Foxes. Joseph sat up, on the ground, with his hands so close to the other that the cord did not move with his motion. Then with a queer trick, which I did not follow, and a wrench which must have been agony to him, he twisted and changed the form of the knot in the rope. Then, by a dexterous grip between his front teeth, he loosened the hold of the knot. He bit again, again, and again.

Hurrah! It is loose, and the boy is free from that snoring hulk by his side. An instant more, and he is out from the tent; he threads his way daintily down the avenue between the tent ropes: he has come to the wady that stretches dry along the west flank of the encampment. Five hundred yards more will take him to the other side of the Cheril-el-bar (the wall of rock which runs down toward the west from the mountains), and he will be free. At this moment two nasty little dogs from the outlying tent of the caravan—what is known among the Arabs as the tent of the warden of the route—sprang after him, snarling and yelling.

The brave boy turned, and, as if he had David's own blood in his veins, and with it the precision of David's eye, he threw a heavy stone back on the headmost cur so skillfully that it struck his spine, and silenced him forever, as a bullet might have done. The other cur, frightened, stood still and barked worse than ever.

I could not bear it. I had only to crush that yelping cur, and the boy Joseph would be free, and in eight-and-forty hours would be in his father's arms. His brothers would be saved from remorse, and the world—

And the world—?

I stretched out my finger unseen over the dog, when my Guardian, who watched all this as carefully as I did, said: "No. They are all conscious and all free. They are His children just as we are. You and I must not interfere unless we know what we are doing. Come here, and I can show you."

He turned me quite around into the region which the astronomers call the starless and region, there showed me another series—oh! An immense and utterly unaccountable series—of systems, which at the moment seemed just like what we had been watching.

“But they are not the same,” said my Guardian, hastily. “You will see they are not the same. Indeed, I do not know myself what these are for,” he said, “unless—I think sometimes they are for you and me to learn from. He is so kind. And I never asked. I do not know.”

All this time he was looking around among the systems for something, and at last he found it. He pointed it out, and I saw a system just like our dear old system, and a world just like our dear old world. The same ear-shaped South America, the same leg-of-mutton-shaped Africa, the same fiddle-shaped Mediterranean Sea, the same boot for Italy and the same football for Sicily. They were all there. “Now,” he said, “here you may try experiments. This is quite a fresh one; no one has touched it. Only these here are not His children—these are only creatures, you know. These are not conscious, though they seem so. You will not hurt them whatever you do; nay, they are not free. Try your dead dog here and see what will happen.”

Sure enough there was the gray of the beautiful morning; there was the old hulk of an Arab snoring in his tent; there was the handsome boy in the dry valley, or wady; there was the dead dog—all just as it happened—and there was the other dog snarling and yelping. I just brushed him down, as I have often wiped a green louse off a rosebush; all was silent again, and the boy Joseph turned and ran. The old hulk of an Arab never I waked. The master of the caravan did not so much as turn in his bed. The boy passed the corner of the Cheril-el-bar carefully, just looked behind to be sure he was not followed, and then, with the speed of an antelope, ran, and ran, and ran. He need not have run. It was two hours before any one moved in the Midianite camp. Then there was a little alarm. The dead dogs were found, and there was a general ejaculation, which showed that the Midianites of those days were as great fatalists as the Arabs of this. But nobody thought of stopping a minute for one slave more or less. The lazy snorer who had let him go was well lashed for his laziness. And the caravan moved on.

And Joseph? After an hour's running, he came to water, and bathed. Now he dared open his bag and eat a bit of black bread. He kept his eyes all around him, he ran no more, but walked, with that firm, assured step of a frontiersman or skillful hunter. That night he slept between two rocks under a terebinth tree, where even a hawk would not have seen him. The next day he treaded the paths along the hillside, as if he had the eyes of a lynx and the feet of a goat. Toward night he approached a camp, evidently of a sheik of distinction. None of the squalidness here of those trading wanderers, the Midianite children of the desert! Everything here showed Eastern luxury even, and a certain permanency. But one could hear lamentation, and on drawing near one could see whence it came. A long procession of women were beating their arms, striking the most mournful chords, and singing—or, if you please, screaming—in strains of the most heartrending agony. Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah led the train three times around old Jacob's tent. There, as before, the curtains were drawn aside, and I could see the old man crouched upon the ground, and the splendid cloak or shawl, where even great black stains of blood did not hide the gorgeousness of the parti-colored knitting, hung before him on the tent pole as if he could not bear to have it put away.

Joseph sprang lightly into the tent. “My father, I am here!”

Oh, what a scream of delight! What ejaculations! What praise to God! What questions and what answers! The weird procession of women heard the cry, and Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah came rushing into the greeting. A moment more, and Judah from his tent, and Reuben from his, headed the line of the false brethren. Joseph turned and clasped Judah's hand. I heard him whisper: “Not a word. The old man knows nothing. Nor need he.”

The old man sent out and killed a fatted calf. They ate and drank, and were merry; and for once I felt as if I had not lived in vain.

And this feeling lasted—yes, for some years of their life. True, as I said, they were years which passed in no time. I looked on, and enjoyed them with just that luxury with which you linger over the charming last page of a novel, where everything is spring, and sunshine, and honey, and happiness. And there was the comfortable feeling that this was my work. How clever of me to have mashed that dog! And he was an ugly brute, too! Nobody could have loved him. Yes; though all this passed in no time, still I had one good comfortable thrill of self-satisfaction. But then things began to darken, and one began to wonder.

Jacob was growing very old. I could see that, from the way he kept in the tents while the others went about their affairs. And then, summer after summer, I saw the wheat blight, and a sort of blast come over the olives; there seemed to be a kind of murrain among the cattle, and no end of trouble among the sheep and goats. I could see the anxious looks of the twelve brothers, and their talk was gloomy enough, too. Great herds of camels dying down to one or two mangy, good-for-nothing skeletons; shepherds coming back from the lake country driving three or four wretched sheep, and reporting that these were all that were left from three or four thousand! Things began to grow doubtful, even in the home camp. The women were crying, and the brothers at last held a great council of the head shepherds, and camel drivers, and masters of horse, to know what should be done for forage for the beasts, and even for food at home.

I had succeeded so well with the dog that I was tempted to cry out, in my best Chaldee: “Egypt! Why don’t you go down to Egypt? There is plenty of corn there.” But first I looked at Egypt, and found things were worse there than they were around Jacob’s tents. The inundation had failed there for year after year. They had tried some wretched irrigation, but it was like feeding the hordes of Egypt on peppergrass and radishes to rely on these little watered gardens. “But the granaries,” I said, “where are the granaries?” Granaries? There were no granaries. That was but a dull set who were in the Egyptian government then. They had had good crops year in and year out, for a great many years, too. But they had run for luck, as I have known other nations to do. Why, I could see where they had fairly burned the corn of one year to make room for the fresher harvest of the next. There had been no Yussuf Ben Yacoub in the ministry to direct the storing of the harvest in those years of plenty. The man they had at the head was a dreamy dilettante, who was engaged in restoring some old carvings of some two-hundred-and-fifty years before.

And, in short, the fellaheen and the people of higher caste in Egypt were all starving to death. That was, as I began to think, a little uncomfortably, what I had brought about when I put my finger on that ugly, howling yellow dog of the sleepy Midianite sentinel.

Well, it is a long story, and not a pleasant one; though, as I have said, as I and my companion watched it, it all went by in no time.—I might even say in less than no time. All the glory and comfort of the encampments of Jacob’s sons vanished. All became a mere hand-to-hand fight with famine. Instead of a set of cheerful, rich, prosperous chiefs of the pasture country, with thousands of retainers, and no end of camels, horses, cattle and sheep, here were a few gaunt, half-starved wanderers, living on such game as they could kill on a lucky hunt, or sometimes reduced to locusts, or to the honey from the trees. What grieved me more was to see the good fellows snapped up, one after another, by the beastly garrisons of the Canaanite cities.

Heaven knows where these devils came from, or how they roughed it through the famine. But here they were, in their fortresses, living, as I say, like devils, with the origins of customs so beastly that I will not stain this paper with them. Here they were, and here they got ahead. I remember how disgusted I was when I saw them go down in ships into the Nile country, and clean out, root and branch, the Egyptians who were left after the famine—just as I have seen a

swarm of rosebugs settle on a rose garden and clean it out in an hour or two. There was the end of Egypt. Then I watched, with an interest not cheerful now, Dido's colony as she sailed with an immense crew of these Moloch-worshipping Canaanites, and their beastly rites and customs, and planted Carthage. It was interesting to see poor Aeneas dodging about on the Mediterranean, while Dido and her set were faring so well—or well they thought it—on—the African shore.

I will own I was rather anxious now. Not but what there was something—and a great gaudy city it was—on the slopes of Mount Moriah and Zion. But it made me sick to see its worship, and I stopped my ears with my fingers rather than hear the songs. O God! the yells of those poor little children as they burned them to death in Hinnom, a hundred at a time, their own mothers dancing and howling by the fires! I cannot speak of it to this day. I dared not look there long. But it was no better anywhere else. I tried Greece; but! could make nothing of Greece. When I looked for the arrival of Danaus with his Egyptian arts and learning—Toonh, I think they called him in Egypt—why there was no Toonh and no Egyptian arts, because these Canaanite brutes had cleared out Egypt. The Pelasgians were in Greece, and in Greece they stayed. They built great walls—I did not see for what—but they lived in cabins at which a respectable Apache would turn up his nose; and century after century they built the same huts, and lived in them. As for manners, they had none, and their customs were very filthy. When it came time for Cadmus, there was no chance for Cadmus. Perhaps he came, perhaps he did not. All I know is that the Molochite invasion of Egypt had swept all alphabet and letters out of being, and that, if Cadmus came, he was rather more low-lived than the Pelasgians among whom he landed. Really, all Greece was such a mess that I hated to follow along its crass stupidity, and the savage raids which the inhabitants of one valley made upon another. This was what I had done for them when I mashed that little yellow dog so easily.

Aeneas and his set seemed to prosper better at first. I could see his ships, with the green leaves still growing on the top-masts, hurry out from the port of Dido. I saw poor Palinurus tumble over. Yes, indeed, queer enough it was to have the old half-forgotten lines of Dryden—whom I know a great deal better than Virgil, more shame to me—come back as poor Nisus pleaded for his friend, as poor Camilla bled to death, and as Turnus did his best for nothing. Yes, I watched Romulus and the rest of them, just as it was in Harry and Lucy's little inch-square history.

I took great comfort in Brutus; I shut my eyes when the noble lady Lucretia stabbed herself; and the quick-moving stereoscope—for I really I began to feel that it was one—became more and more fascinating, till we got to the Second Punic War.

Then it seemed to me as if that cursed yellow dog came to the front again. Not that I saw him, of course. Not him! His bones and skin had been gnawed by jackals a thousand years before. But the evil that dogs do lives after them; and when I saw the anxiety on Scipio's face—they did not call him Africanus—when I looked in on little private conferences of manly Roman gentlemen, and heard them count up their waning resources, and match them against the overwhelming force of Carthage, I tell you I felt badly. You see, Carthage was simply an outpost of all that Molochite crew of the East. In the history I am used to, the Levant of that time was divided between Egypt and Greece, and what there was left of Alexander's empire. But in this yellow-dog system, for which I was responsible, was all one brutal race of Molochism, except that Pelasgian business I told you of in Greece, which was no more to be counted in the balance of power than the Digger Indians are counted in the balance today. This was what made poor Scipio and the rest of them so down-hearted. And well it might. I, who saw the whole, as you may say, together, only, as I have explained, it did not mix itself up—I could see Hannibal and his following of all the Mediterranean powers except Italy, come down on the Romans and crush them as easily as I

crushed the cur. No, not as easily as that, for they fought like fury. Men fought and women fought, boys and girls fought. They dashed into the harbor of Carthage once with fire ships, and burned the fleet. But it was no good: army after army was beaten; fleet after fleet was sunk by the great Carthaginian triremes. Ah me! I remember one had the cordage of the admiral's ship made from the hair of the Roman matrons. But it was all one. If it had been Manila hemp or wire rope, the ship would not have stood when that brutal Sidonian admiral rammed at her with his hundred oarsmen. That battle was the end of Rome. The brutes burned it first. They tumbled down the very walls of the temples. What they could plough, they ploughed. They dragged the boys and girls into slavery, and that was the end. All the rest were dead on the field of battle, or were sunk in the sea.

And so Molochism reigned century after century. Just that, one century after another century: two centuries in all. What a reign it was! Lust, brutality, terror, cruelty, carnage, famine, agony, horror. If I do not say death, it is because death was a blessing in contrast to such lives. For now that there was nobody to fight who had an idea above the Earth and dead things, these swords that were so sharp had to turn against each other. No Israel to crush, no Egypt, no Iran, no Greece, no Rome. Moloch and Canaan turned on themselves and fought Canaan and Moloch. Do not ask me to tell the story! Where beast meets beast, there is no story to tell worth your hearing or my telling. Brute rage gives you nothing to describe. They poisoned, they starved, they burned; they scourged and flayed and crucified; they invented forms of horror for which our imagination, thank God, has no picture, and our languages no name. And, all this time, lust, and every form of pestilence and disease which depends on lust, raged as fire rages when it has broken bounds. It was seldom and more seldom that children were born; nay, when they were born, they seemed only half alive. And those who grew to manhood and womanhood—only it is desecration to use those names—transmitted such untamed beastliness to those who came after!

One hundred years, as I said. Fewer and fewer of these wretches were left in the world. I could see fields grow up to jungles and to forests. A fire wasted Carthage, and another swept away On, and another finished Sidon, and there was neither heart nor art to rebuild them. Then another hundred years dragged by, with worse horrors, if it were possible, and more. The stream of the world's life began to run in drops, now big drops, with a noisy gurgle; black drops, too, or bloody red. Fewer men, and still fewer women, and all mad with beastly rage. Every man's hand was against his brother, as if this were a world of Cains. All this had come to them because they did not like to retain God in their knowledge.

No, I will not describe it. You do not ask me to. And if you asked, I would say "No." Let me come to the end.

The two centuries had gone. There was but a handful of these furies left. Then the last generation came—and for thirty years more of murder and fight it ground along. At the last, how strange it seemed to me, all that are left, in two unequal parties, each of which had its banner still for fight, and a sort of uniform as if they were armies, but only four on one side and nine on the other, met, as if the world were not wide enough for both, and met in that very Syria where I had helped Joseph, son of Jacob, to fling his arms round his father's neck again.

Nor, indeed, was it very far from that spot. It was close to the wreck and ruin of the Jebusite city which had been one of the strongholds last destroyed of one of these clans. That city was burned, but I saw that the ruins were smoking. Just outside there was an open space. I wonder if it had a weird, deadly look, or whether the horror of the day made me think so? I remember a great rock like a man's skull that peered out from the gray, dry ground. Around that rock these

wretches fought, four to nine, hiding behind it, on one side or the other, on that April day, under that black sky.

One is down! Two of the other party are kneeling on him, to take the last breath of life from him. With a yell of rage three or four of his party, dashing their shields on the heads of the two, spring upon them; and I can see one wave his battle-axe above his head, when—

Did the metal attract the spark? A crash! a blaze which dazzled my eyes, and when I opened them the last of these human brutes lay stark dead on the one side and on the other of the grim rock of Calvary!

Not a man or a woman, nor a boy or a girl, not a single soul left in that world!

“Do not be disturbed,” said my Mentor. “You yourself have done nothing.”

“Nothing!” I groaned. “I have ruined a world in my rashness.”

“Nothing,” he repeated. “Remember what I told you: these are—what shall I say?—shadows, shadowy forms. They are not His children. They are only forms which act as if they were—that you and I may see and learn, perhaps begin to understand—only it passes knowledge.”

As he spoke, I remember that I moaned and struggled with him like a crying child. I was all overwhelmed by the sight of the mischief I had done. I would not be comforted.

“Listen to me,” he said again. “You have only done, or wanted to do, what we all try for at first. You wanted to save your poor Joseph. What wonder?”

“Of course I did,” sobbed I. “Could I have thought? Should you have thought?”

“No,” said he, with that royal smile of his—“no. Once I should not have thought it—I could not have thought it—till I, too, tried my experiments.” And he paused.

Perhaps he was thinking what his experiments also were.

Then he began again, and the royal smile had hardly faded away: “Let me show you. Or let me try. You wanted to save your poor Joseph—all sole alone.”

“Yes,” I said. “Why should I not want to?”

“Because he was not alone; could not be alone. None of them was alone; none of them could be alone. Why, you know yourself that not a raindrop in that shower yonder but balances against a dust-grain on the other side of creation. How could Joseph live or die alone? How could that brute he was chained to live or die alone? None of them is alone. None of us is alone. He is not alone. Even He is in us, and we are in Him. But the way with men—and it is not so long, dear friend, since you were a man—the way with men is to try what you tried. I never yet knew a man—and how many have I known, thank God!—I never yet knew a man but he wanted to single out some one Joseph to help—as if the rest were nothing, or as if our Father had no plans.”

“I shall never try that again!” sobbed I, after a long pause.

“Never,” said he, “is a long word. You will learn not to say ‘never.’ But I’ll tell you what you will do. When you get a glimpse of the life in common, when you find out what is the drift—shall I say of the— game, or shall I say of the law?—in which they all and we all, He in us and we in Him, are living, then, oh, it is such fun to strike in and live for all!”

He paused a minute, and then he went on, hesitating at first, as if he feared to pain me even more, but resolutely afterward, as if this must be said.

“Another thing I notice in most men, though not in all, is this: they do not seem at first to understand that the Idea is the whole. Abraham had left Ur rather than have any part with those smoke-and-dust men—Nature-worshippers I think they call them. How was it that you did not see that Joseph was going down to Egypt with the Idea? He could take what they did not have there. And as you saw, in the other place, without it, why, your world died.”

Then he turned around and left that horrid world of phantoms, to go back to our own dear real world. And this time I looked on today. How bright it seemed, and how comforting to me to think that I had never touched the yellow dog, and that he came to his death in his own way!

I saw some things I liked, and some I disliked. It happened that I was looking at Zululand, when poor Prince Lulu's foot slipped at the saddle-flap. I saw the assegai that stabbed him. Had I been a trooper at his side, by his side I would have died too. But no, I was not at his side. And I remembered Joseph, and I said, "From what I call evil, He educes good."