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## The Gadianton: A Story of Zarahemla, Chapter III

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# The Gadianton

A STORY OF ZARAHEMPLA

By E. Heloise Merkley

## III

While Giddianhi hesitated, torn between the memory of his promise to Jarom and his fear of offending Zemnarihah, lest the latter shake his popularity with his followers, Orpah flung herself at his feet, weeping, and begged, "O Giddianhi, kill me, make me a slave, torture me, but do not give me to either of your men. Let me die, disfigure me, deform me, blind me. Send me to the judgment seat of God as soon as you will, but do not scar my soul!"

"Silence!" Giddianhi exclaimed, moved in spite of his hardness by the passion of the plea, or perhaps more by the beauty of her who plead. References to God and virtue were not tolerated among the Gadiantons, and Giddianhi cared for neither.

Orpah endeavored to control herself, but her gray eyes could not restrain the tears that slowly continued to fill them and overflow, nor could she prevent the paleness that marked her cheeks nor the expression of terror that remained upon her face. She rose to her feet and stepped back from Giddianhi, but though she held herself erect, her fingers locked and interlocked and twisted in the mental agony she suffered.

Finally Giddianhi spoke decisively.

"The sword shall decide!" he announced, "Zemnarihah offers money, Jarom claims reward for the abduction. Let them face each other, sword in hand, and he who triumphs shall claim his will. If Jarom wins, he shall have the maiden. If Zemnarihah wins, he shall purchase her and Jarom or his mother shall accept the price he pays and be content."

The words, "or his mother," were significant. Jarom was an unknown spy, just beginning to win renown among his fellows. Like the rest of the Gadiantons he practiced much in the use of all warlike weapons, and his father had been a famous swordsman among them, but whether he possessed more than ordinary skill was not known. Zemnarihah was famed as the most skillful of them all in the use of the sword. For so many years had he conquered all his opponents that a parable had arisen, "Who faces Zemnarihah with sword in hand is never the same again," for when he did not kill he boasted that he always left his mark in a place where it was ever in view. It was apparent, then, that Giddianhi thought Zemnarihah must overcome Jarom with sword and that he took this means of avoiding offense to one so popular and admired. That it might be Jarom's mother who should accept the ransom of Orpah, instead of Jarom himself, indicated to the Gadiantons that Giddianhi would permit the duel to be fatal, though he could easily stop it when it became apparent that one had gained the advantage.

Jarom paled slightly, at the decree, and Zemnarihah smiled triumphantly. And now for the first time, Orpah turned from one to the other, studying them as though she could determine which should win her. The same feeling of revulsion swept her as she looked into the dark handsome face of Zemnarihah that had come at first sight of him. But as she studied the frank face of Jarom, with its tenderly curved, sympathetic lips and its open purity of innocence, if not of virtue, she smiled.

For a long second their eyes lingered together, and something of the ardor and devotion she had awakened in the heart of the young Gadianton, communicated itself to Orpah. It was their first glance of mutual understanding. It gave Jarom the feeling that it was somehow sacred, and consecrated him to her service; that she weighed him in the balance of her virtue and feminine instinct, found him worthy, and accepted him as her champion. Before now, she had considered him only as a stranger who had stolen her away from her father and all that she held dear. She saw him now as one who would save her from a fate she considered worse than death. But could he save her?

Jarom was approaching her, to draw nearer Giddianhi and face his opponent. As he passed he whispered, "Are you afraid of me, Orpah?"

"No, Jarom," she replied, using his name for the first time, and in a tone that thrilled him with joy, "I trust you, and I shall pray that you may win."

No one else heard the words they exchanged, but all could see that the girl had chosen him in preference to Zemnahah. Many of them were influenced by this to strengthen their conviction that the decision of Giddianhi was not perfectly just. Some few there were who sympathized with Jarom because of an instinct to befriend the weaker in a contest, but among the Gadiantons this class were very few. Most of them were openly in favor of Zemnahah, though they loved a good fight well enough to hope that Jarom might be skillful enough to make it interesting.

Orpah's fingers ceased to twist and turn, but clasped themselves quietly together and her grey eyes seemed to be looking trustfully far beyond the ornamented walls of the council hall. Her lips moved softly, and the expression upon her face was strange to

most of those observing it, for they were not familiar with prayer.

Zemnahah threw aside the rich cloak that had hidden his sword, and a weapon was handed to Jarom, who had been wearing none. He did not look at it as he faced his opponent, for his eyes were upon Orpah's face. A strange new emotion was upon him. He knew that she was praying that he might win, and it stirred within him a humility he had never felt before. He had sufficient skill with weapons of war to justify a youthful pride, but something told him now that he must depend upon a greater thing than the skill of his muscles. Zemnahah, he knew, excelled him in that. Yet he was not afraid. Orpah had begged death in preference to the loss of her virtue, and he was the appointed champion to save her from a dreaded fate. She was praying now to the God of virtue, and in spite of his ignorance of that God, Jarom had a sufficient conception of the All Powerful to trust that the prayer of such as she would be more effective armour against the thrusts of Zemnahah than any wrought by man. So he met the scornful smile of his opponent with one of quiet confidence and determination. He felt that he could die willingly to save Orpah from this man, but he knew that he must not die. For her sake he must win. And vaguely he felt that for the honor and glory of the God to whom she prayed, he must also win. Else why a God of virtue?

It was seldom, of late, that Zemnahah faced an opponent who did not perceptibly quail before him and the fiery threat of his dark eyes. But Jarom met the threat unflinchingly. He was smiling slightly, encouraged by the sight of Zemnahah's rather overfull form. It was apparent that the famous swordsman had recently been indulging in the good things of the earth until his body was not in perfect condition. Jarom even suspected

that his foe might find himself rather short of breath. Whatever his own lack of skill with the sword as compared with Zemnarihah, he knew that his lungs, like those of a wolf, would never tire. So much, at least, had his constant exercise and long miles of travel on foot done for him. Could he, he asked himself, by taking the defensive and keeping his temper, tire Zemnarihah out? Yet, knowing the fame of the older man for feats of strength as well as skill, he doubted. This fulness of Zemnarihah's body, as contrasted with his own sinewy leanness, might mean only the difference in their maturity. Older men were always heavier, he told himself.

Giddianhi gave the signal for the fight to commence, and the silence that descended upon the great hall was emphasized by the ringing of steel as their weapons clashed in the first preliminary strokes. Zemnarihah took the offensive, so easily and calmly that it seemed as though he were merely playing. Yet so swift and sure were his strokes that Jarom found it necessary to concentrate every ounce of his energy upon the problem of protecting himself from them. He could not for the slightest fraction of a second allow his eyes to wander from that rising and falling, thrusting and withdrawing, slender blade of shining steel that sought and sought continuously for a vulnerable spot. Yet it seemed to him that he was looking still at Orpah. So vivid was the image of her face with its prayerful look that it seemed always just beyond the threatening ribbon of steel in Zemnarihah's hand.

Time lost all significance to Jarom. He held himself resolutely to the determination to keep upon the defensive, to save his strength, and to watch so closely that Zemnarihah should not touch him.

Zemnarihah began taunting him. He flushed at first, as the low, jeering tones of the man reached his ears, and trembled slightly. Then he remembered

that this was one of his foe's favorite methods of gaining an advantage over a hot tempered opponent.

"I must not hear him," Jarom whispered to himself, "Orpah is praying that I shall win. I must not let him anger me. He who becomes angry, wastes his energy. I must not hear," and by sheer will power he closed the doors of his consciousness against the sneers of the man who had offered to buy Orpah with gold.

They fought on and on, Zemnarihah ever aggressive, Jarom ever defensive, and still neither had touched the other, and neither seemed to gain an advantage. As Zemnarihah struck a little more frequently upon the right side, and as Jarom moved slightly to avoid each blow, they slowly turned about as on a pivot. It seemed to Jarom that he had passed beyond time and was destined to continue on throughout eternity thus warding off the lightning thrusts of that slender sword. It was like a nightmare to him. If he had not impressed himself so thoroughly with the thought that he must take no risks, it would have seemed a relief to fling himself upon the sword and snap it, so tantalizing was it becoming, so difficult to parry. His fingers that graspel his own sword ached, his wrist ached, his arm ached, and still his breath came regularly and his nimble feet made up for what lack there was in his arm.

But now he realized that there had come a change in the nightmare. Zemnarihah had ceased to say those things to which he would not listen, and strangely Zemnarihah himself seemed to have been maddened by his own taunts. His dark face was flushed, his eyes were dilated, and his breath came in angry gasps. Fiercer and still more fiercely did he thrust. And now for the first time Jarom's confidence was shaken. Desperately he met the thrusts, but suddenly, like a cold hand gripping his heart, fear came upon him. He had depended upon prayer

to save him. Who was he that he should be worthy of assistance from Orpah's God? What had he done to render himself a fit champion of the lovely maiden he had abducted? Suppose Zemnarihah killed him, could not Orpah's God, if such a being existed, save her through some other means?

Zemnarihah's sword touched him and drew blood. Again it touched, and again, and yet again. Jarom felt himself doomed. And then he caught a glimpse of Orpah's face, quivering with terror, passionately pleading, imploring him to save her, praying God to help him. "Oh, God," he begged inwardly, "do not let me fail. For her sake let me win. She is good. Forgive me for bringing her here and let me save her from him." He was not conscious that he was praying. He only knew that Orpah must be saved. This man who faced him so triumphantly, playing, as it were, with his victim, had taken on the aspect of a demon. He must not possess Orpah.

Fear departed. Jarom smiled back into Zemnarihah's taunting face and grew calm. Then, with sudden resolve, the younger man flung caution to the winds and took the aggressive. So rapid became his thrusts, so swiftly did he spring inward and back again, returning the slight wounds Zemnarihah had given him that the latter, surprised, lost for a second his calm poise. And in that second, Jarom, seeing his advantage, struck upward twistingly with his weapon and flung the sword of Zemnarihah from his hand. Ere it struck the floor the point of his sword had entered the palm from which it flew and raised it, helpless, at arm's length above Zemnarihah's head. Jarom then looked at Giddianhi, pausing for a signal to cease or to despatch his enemy and very promptly the chief gave him the sign to stop.

"Come with me," he said to Orpah, as he flung his borrowed sword to the

feet of the captain, and unobservant of the storm of applause that followed him, he led her from the hall. Leaving the maiden in charge of servants with the orders to care for her, he sought out his mother and explained to her all that had passed since he left her, adding, with a tone of mastery she had never heard from him before, "She is to be your daughter. Will you treat her as such and let her win your love?" For a moment their wills clashed. But Jarom won. His mother answered at last, "I will try."

And so, in the new surroundings, Orpah found herself not ill treated. The mother of Jarom scrupulously kept her word, and in spite of herself found her son's words being fulfilled as love crept into her heart. The Gadiantons, in general, remembered the fight with Zemnarihah and refrained from persecuting her. And Jarom, scarcely recognizing the force that moved upon him, showed in his every word and look and act the great love that was growing within him and changing his very nature.

Passionately Jarom devoted himself to the attempt to make her love the mountains. At least, he thought it was the mountains he tried to make her love. He took her climbing to the points where the views were most gorgeous, searched with her for the most delicate flowers that blossom near the snow, taught her to hunt the fleet footed animals that live upon the high cliffs, fished in the streams for the most delicately flavored meat known to the palate of man, and continually stayed in her presence. Orpah was grateful for the kindness, admired the beauty, and genuinely tried to find some sort of contentment.

But the thought of her loved ones down on the plain, of her father's agony especially, and the dread of the long years ahead among this fierce and brutal community could not be forgotten. She smiled, but slowly it

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