

Chapter 4: Why Solomon Had a Press Agent

THE members of the Ladies in Hades Club, gathered as usual at Eve's palatial residence in the exclusive Figleaf Park section, were listening to a brief report by the Secretary.

"A great many requests have been received from prominent citizens," Sappho announced, "including a number of well-known reformers, asking permission to attend one of our meetings, but in accordance with House Rule Number One I have informed them all that outsiders are not admitted.

"A representative of the *Gehenna Gazette* has also been to see me, with the idea of publishing our minutes, and Famous Sinners, Incorporated, want to put us all in a big production they are planning to make, under the auspices of the Boosters for a Bigger and Better Hell Associa-

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tion, to be called 'Singed Sirens' or something of the sort——”

At once the club was in an uproar. Every member, it seemed, had been nursing screen aspirations for years, and insisted that the offer be accepted. Eve had great difficulty in bringing the meeting to order.

“For goodness sake be quiet for a moment, can't you?” she exclaimed. “We shall have to put these offers on the table for the present at least—until I can have a talk with Satan. You understand how he feels about our discussions——”

“I don't see that we have been saying anything so terrible,” Delilah interrupted.

“Neither do I. But you know how pig-headed Satan is. He claims there are too many radicals in Hell already and he doesn't propose to let any aggregation of freethinkers, no matter who they may be, undermine his authority by poisoning the minds of the public. Only this morning he telephoned me that he had heard we were questioning the Biblical account of the Fall of Man, and that our unorthodox views on free love, evolution and birth control were likely

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to get him into trouble with the Higher Authorities. 'Hypocrisy,' he said, 'must and shall be preserved!' So there you are."

"That hasn't anything to do with the question of pictures," Salome said.

"I know. But I also know Famous Sinners. These picture people are all alike. They see we are getting a little publicity and they want to take advantage of it. For all we know, they may not have Satan's permission to make any such production. It would be foolish for us to take action regarding their offer until His Majesty and I have discussed it thoroughly."

The report of the secretary having been finally laid on the table, the Queen of Sheba took the chair.

"I promised, my dears," she smiled, draping herself comfortably upon a divan, "to give you the lowdown on my famous trip to Jerusalem to see King Solomon. There has been a great deal of gossip about that expedition, but I do not mind telling you I have made other little journeys which gave me more of a thrill. I visited the Pharaoh of Egypt once, and believe me, my dears, there was a man to write home about."

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“One of my ancestors,” Cleopatra observed, smiling. “They say it runs in the family.”

“If you mean It with a very large capital, you are right, my dear. I found him irresistible, myself. But to come back to Solomon. Of course I never took much stock in the stories I heard about his wisdom. No man with brains would marry seven hundred wives. But I confess I was attracted by his optimism and wanted to see on what it was based.

“I had been terribly restless that particular spring, and a young Abyssinian I had been very nice to all winter—a charming fellow, a captain in the camel corps—had the execrable taste, when I told him everything was over between us, to commit suicide on the palace steps. It upset me considerably, besides making a dreadful mess. Men are so inconsiderate. If he had only jumped in the fish pond I shouldn’t have minded so much, with the crocodiles in need of a good square meal.

“So what with the spring coming on, and my boy friend proving such a total loss, to say nothing of some new gowns I had just had made, I decided to run up to Jerusalem and find out

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what it was that got this Hebrew king so much space on the front pages.”

“I understand how you felt, my dear,” Helen of Troy laughed. “We all know, of course, that men are pretty much alike, when you come down to essentials, and yet I have never been able to get over the idea that each new one I meet is going to give me a new thrill.”

“My experience exactly,” Phryne nodded. “It keeps a girl young. They used to say in Athens that I had had an affair with every man in the place, from Plato down. That was why the League of Neglected Wives had me arrested. I’ll tell you, some time, about my famous trial. Go ahead, darling.”

“Well, so far as Solomon was concerned,” Queen Balkis went on, “I found him a very decent old chap. Not good-looking, but with a lot of personality, if you know what I mean. Most kings have, I find. He gave me a splendid reception, keys of the city and everything.

“When we got to the palace I showed him my presents—quite a collection of stuff I had taken along, ivory, spices and the like, to let the Jerusalem crowd see I was a regular queen who

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had been to court before,—not a piker. And of course I figured that no gentleman, not even a Jerusalem gentleman, would accept presents from a lady and not give her at least twice as much in return. That is the advantage of being the one who starts these gift games. The other fellow always has to go you one better. I did a great deal of traveling, in my time.

“There was a lot of excitement in the harem the night I arrived, and after supper Solomon took me out in the garden and had some of his concubines do a dance. I looked the extra ladies over—about a thousand of them—a regular mob scene.

“‘You would have made a fortune, king,’ I said, ‘in the picture business. Do you know them all by their first names?’

“He said no, he didn’t, that as a matter of fact he only kept them around for publicity purposes, and to help in entertaining visiting boards of trade and people like that from the rural districts.

“‘I don’t even know the names of a lot of my wives, yet,’ he said, with an embarrassed smile. ‘We use numbers, mostly, here in the



"When Solomon told me," the Queen of Sheba resumed, "that every little wifie had a number all her own, I asked him if they all had his."

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harem. It simplifies matters considerably, if you see what I mean. Avoids confusion and all that. I'm down as far as Number 386, right now, although it may be 368—I've somehow lost track. The Superintendent of the Royal Wives takes care of all such details. Uses a card-index system some efficiency expert from Memphis sold him last year. It's supposed to be the latest wrinkle in scientific harem management.' ”

“I never heard of such nonsense!” Mrs. Potiphar exclaimed, angrily. “If *my* husband had suggested anything of the sort I would have had him psychoanalyzed.”

“When Solomon told me,” the Queen of Sheba resumed, “that every little wifie had a number all her own, I asked him if they all had *his*.

“‘I'm afraid so,’ he laughed. ‘This king business is a hard job.’ Then he sent the concubines back to their dormitories so we could hear ourselves talk.

“He had a funny line—not the fast oriental stuff I had expected, but rather highbrow, with a lot of fatherly advice. I confess I was bored.

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“‘They tell me, king,’ I said, leaning up against him so he would be sure not to miss my new Night of Passion perfume, ‘that you are a wizard with the wise-cracks.’

“‘Wisdom,’ he announced, edging away from me a little, ‘is more to be desired than rubies. Don’t you think so, queen?’

“‘I am not going to commit myself,’ I laughed, ‘until I take a good look at the one you are wearing in that ring. And anyway, who wants to be wise? Even a king must have his foolish moments if only to prove how clever he can be when he really sets his mind on it. All wisdom gets you is wrinkles.’ I moved a little closer to him and took hold of his hand—the one with the ring on it.

“He looked rather uneasy, and began to comb the permanent wave out of his beard.

“‘The fool,’ he muttered, ‘pursueth strange women.’

“‘Isn’t it the truth,’ I said. ‘But the wise man sits still and lets the woman do the pursuing. Play that on your jewsharp. And if your remarks about strange women are meant for me, I will say that after the reception you

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have given me, inviting me to stay at the palace and everything, I do not feel at all strange, but quite like one of the family, even if you haven't given me a number yet.'

"He looked even more upset at that, and tried to pull away his hand, but I held on to it.

"'What strong hands you have, Solomon dear,' I said. 'And such nice skin. The kind you love to touch. You do not mind, I hope, if I touch you.' Just then the ring he was wearing with the big ruby in it came right off in my fingers. I have always been very fond of rubies.

"Solomon didn't say a word, but he kept staring at the ring. I could see that he was unhappy.

"'What is the matter, dearie?' I asked. 'Don't you care for your little chocolate drop, or do you prefer blondes, like so many Jerusalem gentlemen I have met?'

"'I am not particular what color they come,' he said, 'for I have plenty of all colors, including black. What I want is a woman who will love me for myself.'

"'Now that,' I told him, 'is certainly a very

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original remark, and I cannot remember ever having heard it before. Still, you should not worry, because no woman could help loving a great big wonderful sheik like you, with so many jewels and everything. This is a very nice ring.'

"'It is the best ring I own,' he grumbled, 'and the stone in it cost me fifty thousand shekels.'

"'That being the case,' I said, trying the ring on, 'I know you will say it is just the sort of ring a young girl like me should wear. So if you do not mind, Solomon dear, I will keep the stone in memory of our first meeting. And I will show it to all my boy friends when I get home, just to prove to them that you are the wisest king in the whole world and know a good thing when you see it.'

"I thought he might show a little interest, then, but all he did was sit there and play with his beard. I was terribly disappointed."

"Not at all surprising, my dear," Lucrezia Borgia laughed. "No man could be expected to show much pep, trying to live up to a card-index system."

"I suppose not. But I couldn't see why he

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should treat *me* like one of his wives. So I thought I had better start something.

“‘Are you fond of games, Solomon dear?’ I asked.

“He said he wasn’t sure, and what kind of a game was it? If it was a ring game, he wasn’t interested.

“‘This is something new,’ I told him, ‘which has been quite the rage in my home town all winter, and it is a question game called Ask Me Another.’

“‘I have never heard of that particular game,’ he admitted, ‘but it sounds safe, and they tell me I am very good at answering questions so I will take a chance. How do you play it?’

“‘Well,’ I said, ‘you have a book with a lot of difficult questions in it, like, Where was Moses when the light went out? and, Who built Noah’s ark? and you ask your friends what are the answers. And whenever one of them happens to make a good guess he is so pleased with himself that he says right out, “Ask me another.” I have not got the book with me, having left it in my trunk, but there are three questions I have been saving up in my mind to ask you because

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I know you are the wisest man in the world and can answer any question no matter how hard it may be. So I will now ask you these three questions and you can tell me the answers. Each question has a very interesting point to it, and before we get through I am sure you will not fail to see the point. The first question is, What is God's greatest gift to woman?"

"Solomon looked rather puzzled, when I asked him that and I was afraid he was going to miss it. But he didn't.

" 'A man,' he said, acting as though he suspected there was a catch in it somewhere.

" 'Right,' I told him, 'and you certainly do show a lot of ability at this game. Now I shall ask you the second question, which is, What is God's greatest gift to man?"

" 'A woman,' he exclaimed, without hesitating for a moment.

" 'Correct again,' I said, 'and I think it is wonderful the way you answer these questions so quickly.'

" 'They do not seem such hard questions to me,' he mumbled, 'and in spite of what you say I do not see any point to them.'

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“‘Why, Solomon,’ I laughed, ‘that is very simple. The point of the first question is a man, of course. And the point of the second question is a woman. And now, since you are so good at all sorts of figures perhaps you can tell me what is the shortest distance between two points.’”

“If he missed that one,” Thais exclaimed, “he should have been packed off to an old gentleman’s home at once.”

“My dears,” Queen Balkis laughed, “I thought at first he was going to, but all of a sudden he must have got it, for he took me in his arms and kissed me. After that, what with the ice being broken and everything, we had a very enjoyable evening, in spite of a number of hurry-up calls from the harem.

“I stayed at the palace a month. The Superintendent of the Royal Wives took a vacation and went fishing. When I left, Solomon gave me back all my presents and a lot of new ones, to show me how much he had enjoyed my visit. All in all I was rather glad to leave. He was a nice, fatherly old gentleman, but as one of his wives—Number 642 I think it was—said to

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me just before I went away, he certainly did owe a great deal to his press agent."

Delilah, who had been following Queen Sheba's story closely, began to laugh.

"Samson was like that," she said. "Forever bragging about how good he was, showing his muscle and everything, but to tell you the truth——"

Just what the truth about Samson was the club did not learn—at least not then. A sudden commotion arose at the rear of the hall and one of the under demons came in, pushing a somewhat disheveled figure ahead of him with his pitchfork.

"Just caught this bird climbing through the cellar window, ma'am," he said to Eve. "What'll I do with him?"

"If it isn't my old friend Don Juan!" Lucrezia Borgia exclaimed. "Do you know, Don, if Saint Peter were only a woman, I believe you would succeed in persuading her to let you into Heaven!"

"You flatter me," the Don smiled.

"Just the same," snapped Eve, "you can't come in here. Men aren't allowed."

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"I throw myself on your mercy, ladies," the Don said, executing a graceful bow. "The odds, I confess, are somewhat against me but I have always been of a hopeful disposition." In spite of the coal dust upon his small-clothes he presented a not unattractive figure.

Eve turned to the under demon with a smile.

"It's all right, officer," she said. "We don't care to prefer charges. You can leave him to us."

"God help him," the demon grinned, and went out.

"Although it is strictly against our rules," Eve continued, "I have decided, Don, now that our meeting is over, to permit you to remain to supper—but on one condition—you must disclose the name of the particular member whose charms have brought you here to-night. Don't be afraid to speak. We are all good friends, and promise not to be jealous."

"You want the truth, I suppose?" the Don asked, looking very uncomfortable.

"Of course. What a question," replied Eve.

"Very well. Since you insist, I may as well tell you that I was crawling through the coal

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hole, while you ladies were busy with your philosophical discussions, in the hope of making the acquaintance of your very pretty French maid, Marie."

"What!" the twelve members of the Club exclaimed in chorus. Eve was the first to recover her equanimity.

"Hold the wretch!" she cried, running to the door. "I'll be back in a moment." She left the room, while the unfortunate Don, surrounded by the outraged club members, vainly tried to effect his escape.

When Eve returned she held in her hands three sheets.

"Help me tear these into strips!" she cried, "Then we will show him an amusing game they play in Egypt, called the Mummy at the Feast."

A dozen hands came to her assistance, helped her rip the sheets into a score of narrow bandages. A few moments later, in spite of his furious struggles, the Don had been swathed from head to foot in snowy wrappings, and propped against the wall as helpless as a lay figure.

"Now," Eve remarked, with a malicious grin, "we will have Salome do the dance of the Seven

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Veils for him. I hope, under the circumstances, he enjoys it.”

Salome was magnificent. Never had she danced with greater abandon. At the removal of the first veil the tall figure of the Don was seen to quiver slightly. At the second, his face turned the color of a beet. At the third, he groaned aloud. At the fourth he tried to speak. At the fifth, his eyes took on a glassy stare. At the sixth, his jaw dropped. And at the seventh he gave a loud gasp and fell to the floor unconscious. The excitement had proved too much for Don Juan—he had fainted.

Leaving their victim stretched out like some ridiculous white cocoon, the ladies of the club went in to supper.