

# PARMASHTA'S PRIDE

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF ESTHER

PART OF THE 'ONLY A BOY' SERIES

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I picked up the huge silver goblet and gazed at my reflection in the bright red wine inside. Surrounding me were princes, nobles, wise men and other important people attended by their servants. Conjurers, dancers and musicians provided the evening entertainment for the hundreds of men in the Great Hall and they were loud and funny. Finishing off my wine I smiled broadly, enjoying the atmosphere.

For the last six months, Susa Citadel had been home to a massive exhibition, where fancy jewellery, precious gemstones, golden treasures and military trophies had been displayed as a tribute to our King. Susa was a major city in the Babylonian Empire, at the end of the 'Royal Road' which led towards Sardis on the Mediterranean Sea.

As it was the end of the exhibition, King Ahazuereus had thrown a party. Fire-eaters ran through the crowds, amazing people with the sheets of flame they blew from their mouths. It was a great trick, because it didn't seem to burn them. Boys gasped as the flames flared near them. Jugglers threw everything they could find...batons, sticks, swords and drinking goblets. Everyone laughed when one of them picked up a goblet which was full of wine, by mistake. It was a great occasion - the social event of the year - and people jostled to be seen beside the King, to show off how 'special' they were.

At the next table, my friend Parmashta sat with his family. We had grown up together in the same part of town. His house stood against the citadel wall by the old gate to the east and it was very grand. He was tall, a good looking boy who had a particular skill in archery. I was a better swordfighter than him and we often faced each other in training and court competitions.

The king, who had been drinking, rose unsteadily to his feet and motioned with his arm in the direction of his servants. He ordered that his wife, Queen Vashti, be summoned to parade her beauty for all the guests to see.

At the time, the Queen was entertaining the ladies at the Royal Palace and word was quickly conveyed to her regarding the King's wishes.

When the messenger returned however, there was no Queen.

She refused to come because she was not going to stop her party to dance and twirl for a load of drunken men who wanted to ogle at her.

There was a sudden hush as the music crashed in a chaotic muddle!

What had she done?

In one moment, she had insulted both the King and all his guests. The King was furious! His guests were stunned that she had refused to obey his wishes. It was very tense and all eyes were fixed on the King.

Eventually, he signalled that the party should continue. The band sparkled, but things were very strained and uneasy. People clustered in corners, discussing what they thought might happen. The gentle murmur of conversation was soon a noisy din.

The King, when he had calmed down, summoned his counsellors to his side, one of whom was my Dad. In fact he was quite high up in the King's inner circle, which meant we had quite a nice life. 'What should be done with Vashti, my disobedient wife?' he asked. He was embarrassed and very angry because he had been shown up in front of his guests.

Soon it was announced that she was to be banished from the court and would no longer be Queen, as an example to other women. That was very serious, much more than being sent to sit on the naughty step. This was permanent and immediate – she left the following day!

The news media swung into action. Reporters descended on the Palace like a swarm of worker bees while artists sketched cartoons depicting the King's mood, with Vashti disappearing over the horizon, complete with a black puffball cloud above her head. Daily, messengers waited at the Palace doors, eager for snippets of information for their editors. It was a huge scandal and was front page news in all the papers.

Eventually, a proclamation was made.

The King would have a new Queen. His court officials would arrange a huge 'beauty contest.'

Well, the rumour-merchants soon got busy. There was much debate about who the front-runners in the contest might be. Would it be the lovely, young, long-legged Petronia from the wealthy region near the shores of the Persian Gulf, or perhaps the gentle, almond-eyed Feoella from the great noble house of Ammunjar?

Then again, perhaps an outsider might be chosen, like the dark skinned, ample-fleshed, Bohadair from the Bedouin region. Her fun-loving nature was well known among the men of her tribe. Could she steal the King's heart? He would be her biggest challenge.

Like Parmashta, I was only a boy at the time. I was fourteen years old and my name was Younus. We agreed on a bet over which woman would become the Queen. If I won, Parmashta would give me his best bow; if I lost, I would surrender my sword.

As the weeks went by, many young women were brought into the King's Harem, to begin a course of beauty treatment. I thought some of them needed more than a short course – more like ten years! Others were stunningly beautiful already.

The harem was a collection of women who would be provided for the King's interest. Once there, the women would remain at the Palace forever, some of them never ever seeing the King again. It depended on how much he liked them – they had to please him! In the harem, all the women were put into the care of a bald-headed man called Hegai. He was a kind of beautician, dietician and personal trainer rolled into one but as he never spoke with men, he acted a bit strangely at times.

One contestant who caught his eye was a beautiful, raven haired, slim and shapely young woman. She was gentle, courteous and well spoken and her name was Hadasah. Sure enough, when she met the King, he fell instantly in love with her and it was soon known that she would be the new Queen.

Unfortunately, the happy news of her appointment was overshadowed by an assassination attempt on the King's life. Two men had plotted to ambush him when he was out riding, but an old crippled man who regularly wandered the streets and hung around the palace gates had discovered their plans. He passed word to the new Queen, who in turn had warned the King. The two men were caught before they could carry out their plan and were executed for treason.

With the royal head now safe, a huge banquet was arranged to celebrate the coronation. Queen Hadassah was revealed to the whole gathering who had dressed in their best finery as a sign of their respect. I attended carrying my newest possession – a very special, beautiful new bow!

Very soon, Palace life settled back into the day to day pattern of social climbing and snobbery among the nobility and palace officials.

One day, Parmashta ran into my room, his face puffed up like an over-stuffed parrot-fish! "My father Haman, has just been promoted to the inner circle of the King's advisers. That means he is now more senior than your Dad!"

I never liked his Dad who had an irritating and arrogant habit of walking around with his nose in the air as though every other person on the entire planet was a lesser being than he. In reality, he was a weasel-like, scrawny, spotty-faced man with an oversized and pointed nose. Very ugly!

Parmashta was acting like a complete donkey. 'My Dad's more important than yours' he brayed, as he padded around proudly. But if I thought he was proud, his Father was insufferable! He now said everyone should bow in his presence or when he passed them in the street although how he could see them was a mystery – his nose was stuck so high in the air.

However, his delight in newly found fame was short-lived.

The crippled old man in the street simply would not bow down to him.

"No way!" Unfortunately, Haman wouldn't make allowance for his disability.

Now, in one sense, the man was surprised to be spoken to at all, because normally people only stared and pointed. No one ever communicated with him. He was like a 'nobody!' Haman didn't even ask whether the man was physically capable of bowing, whether his disability prevented him. He was just angry that the man didn't put his face to the ground.

It turned out that the man was a Jew and was forbidden by his religious beliefs to bow to anyone but God. He hadn't meant to be disrespectful, but neither would he bow down.

That did it!

Haman was furious.

He began to think how to get rid of the man, whose name was Mordecai. In fact, in his annoyance, he decided to try to kill all the Jews in the land, such was his hatred of anyone who stood in his way.

Approaching the King, he cunningly made a number of false statements and suggestions until the King agreed that the Jews should all be killed. King Ahazuerus gave Haman his own signet ring as a sign of royal authority and passed a law allowing for their extermination. Haman wasted no time in finalising his plans but news soon emerged of his cruel intentions. The signet ring was as good as the King's own signature and once a law was passed it was never amended.

I thought this was awful! Parmashta gloated. 'My Father is far too important to be bothered with squeamish, lesser beings' opinions. Besides, Jewish families are second-class citizens, weak people in the population. No one will miss them.'

"How can you say that?" I gasped, horrified at his words. "How can you even think such outrageous things?" "Every person's life is important and no one should ever say otherwise"

Such racist comments were unbelievable. I was shocked that they came from Parmashta's mouth. He was beginning to sound more and more like his over-ambitious, unpleasant father. I hated how he had changed and wondered how I could have liked him in the first place. He certainly wasn't my friend any more!

Anyway, the crippled man again got word to the Queen about what was happening and it triggered many questions in my mind.

Did he know the new Queen?  
Why would she be bothered by racist threats?  
She wasn't involved in politics. Her only activities were charity visits.  
Why would she want to know?  
What could she do about any of it anyway?  
What was the missing link in this jigsaw?  
I couldn't figure it out.

After much searching and questioning, I uncovered some very juicy information. It turned out that Mordecai was the Queen's uncle. Incredible! That made her a Jew as well! Now, it started to fall into place. She would be threatened by Haman's laws too, if people found out. It was so secret, even the King didn't know.

Also, I discovered that her real Jewish name was Esther and not Hadassah. That was an Arabic name she had been given by Hegai. It spelled trouble...lots of trouble!

Parmashta smelled a rat too. He was sure something was wrong, but I was not going to let him know the Queen's secret. I ignored his questions and sniffing around.

Hadassah secretly smuggled a message back to Mordecai, saying she would talk with the King to see if anything could be done.  
That was dangerous talk!

Unless the King asked for you to approach him, you could be killed for getting too close – even if you were his wife. His guards were under orders to protect him from anyone who got within 10 metres of him unannounced or uncalled for. The guards remained in a high state of alert after the failed, treasonous plot. In fact, the Palace gates were now protected by large blocks of stone, preventing anyone from driving a chariot into the Palace compound.

Hadassah told Mordecai to ask the Jews to pray and go without food, pleading for God's protection. If God wouldn't protect her, or if she was unsuccessful, her cover would be blown and she would inevitably die. She made up her mind to rely on God, rather than her position as Queen.

Meanwhile, Haman grew in his hatred of Mordecai and the Jews. Behind his back, people gossiped and distrusted him and his hateful desire for revenge began to show deeply on his already ugly face, carving deep lines on his forehead and creating great dark patches under both eyes. Although he carried out his court duties well enough, angry dark forces ate at his heart and he looked miserable.



Then one day, suddenly, he was full of smiles!  
He was genuinely happy, his eyes filled with excitement, full of joy.  
'Was this really the same man?  
Why the sudden change?'

Parmashta couldn't keep it to himself and lost no time in boasting that his Dad had been invited to a banquet provided by the Queen. Such high honour was incredibly rare – a sign of affection, for sure and Haman strutted around like an overfed peacock with a golden megaphone, telling everyone who cared to listen what a 'special relationship' he had with the King and Queen. He even invited neighbours for dinner just to talk about it. 'Imagine! Just him and the King and Queen! Could life ever be more wonderful? He must tip off the court reporters to record the event. He could see the headlines already..'

'Stuck up so and so!' I thought. 'We'll never hear the end of this now!'

But who could have possibly predicted what happened next?

On the very morning of the banquet, the King wanted Haman to attend the Palace. His circle of counsellors were all there and he wanted their advice. He planned to honour someone who had pleased him very much and wanted appropriate suggestions. Haman clearly thought the King was talking about him, so he was quick with his advice. 'My Lord should put the man on a special horse, dressed in royal robes. He should be led through the streets by a Counsellor, for all to see. A royal trumpeter should blow and the Town Crier announce that this is how the King rewards those he holds in highest honour! Everyone should bow in deep respect!'

'Brilliant!' said the King. 'What a great plan!'

Haman smirked, proud that yet again that his advice had been taken.

The King then asked Haman to personally lead Mordecai through the streets and honour him just as he had suggested, not forgetting to bow.

'What? But...?'

Haman gagged on his words, completely stunned!

His face turned white – red - then a shade of...green, and the proud smile on his face disappeared as though a pickpocket had just stolen it.

'M-Mordecai...?'

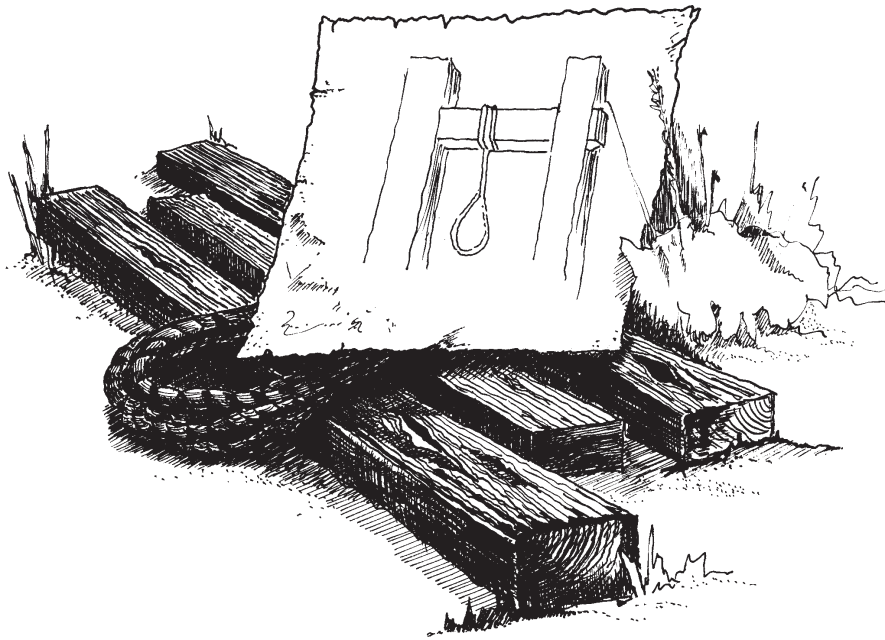
Surely there was a mistake. That wasn't what he wanted!

As he left to do the Kings bidding, smiles erupted among the other nobles as they saw the tables turned on Haman. Once he was gone, the smiles grew to become raucous laughter. It was a delicious moment!

Evidently, the King had remembered it was Mordecai who had warned of the assassination attempt and he had never thanked him.

Later that afternoon, still fuming, Haman returned home to plan his revenge on Mordecai.

Parmashta let it slip that his family and friends had suggested hanging him. Haman smiled wickedly as the thought of being rid of Mordacai settled in his mind and he ordered the immediate construction of gallows next to his house. Wooden beams and rope arrived within the hour.



Just then, the Queen's carriage arrived, pulled by four white Arabian stallions, to take Haman to the special banquet. Neighbours turned out to watch as he climbed into the impressive carriage, dressed in all his finest robes. Then he disappeared off into the night with a huge satisfied smile on his smug face.

Things obviously went well and he was ecstatic at being invited to return to the Palace again the following night.

Parmashta's reaction was unbearable!

"Today will be the last time we shall speak as friends," he announced. Since they were now the king's special friends and far more important than anyone else in the entire Kingdom, they felt they could no longer mingle with "commoners".

"How rude is that?" I blurted out, unable to contain my emotions any longer.

Incredibly, the following night, things changed forever.



Without warning, at the Queen's palace, Haman was arrested! Guards marched him off at sword-point and clapped him in chains. Then he was put on 'death row' for treason, at the jail.

His cruel plans to kill the Jews had backfired spectacularly. The King now recognised Hadassah as Jewish, therefore Haman's plans were a direct threat to her. Ahazuerus acted instantly to protect his new Queen and the evil plotter was in deep trouble.

The following day, Haman and all his sons, including Parmashta, were executed.

Actually, Haman was killed next to his own house, in view of his neighbours, who turned out to watch. Apparently, someone had found some wood and rope there...

The court reporters printed the story under the heading  
**'Massive Pride comes before Massive fall!'**

In the days that followed, Mordecai was promoted to the Royal Court. In fact, he became second-in-command to the King.

Parmashta's story finished there! (He was right. We never did speak again). Haman's story ended there too!

Mordecai moved to the Palace and I'm still here to tell my tale. As for Esther? Someone wrote a whole book about her!

Being powerful and important without showing real friendship or consideration didn't count for much. Haman had demanded respect that he hadn't earned and he was unable to give any respect to a disabled old man, or his people and their beliefs. Such evil spread like a disease, which affected his whole family.

His ambition twisted his mind until murder and revenge were all he could think about! But he was no match for God who answered the prayers of his people, those who trusted in Him.

I once heard that there is an old Jewish saying - 'God hates the proud - but lifts up the humble.'

I guess that's more than just a saying.

I reckon it's a fact!