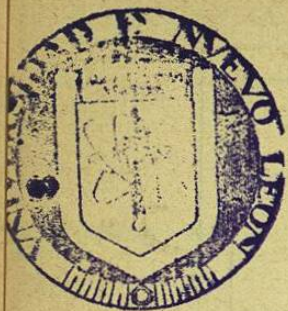


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By the Waters of Babylon

I

It was the day of the great King's hunting in the flowering month of Nisan, and many lions were to be offered to Nergal and to Bel. Artaxerxes was proceeding to the chase. Erect, exultant, he drove, holding the reins lightly in his long fingers, while about him roared the chariot wheels of his huntsmen and the trampling feet of many horses. The darkened rims of his large, almond eyes drew close together as he faced the level sunrays. The golden light caught the jewels in his royal tiara and shone on the twin lions of his dagger hilt. Three horses, fleet-footed and black as the night, drew on his chariot. In gilded harnesses and tassels of gold and scarlet they swept

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along the river road which traversed Babylon from wall to wall.

Behind the King, pressing closely together in a glittering cavalcade, came his royal guard, the curled warriors of Babylonia. Their flowing beards and heavy hair fell in jetty ringlets, stiff and regular, and shone with perfumed ointments; golden serpents adorned their sturdy limbs. Short hunting-robcs embroidered fantastically with figures of the chase were bound about their waists with girdles of linked lotus flowers. Behind them as they drove close together in their hunting chariots, were a number of soldiers mounted on swift Arabian horses, armed with spears which shone like a gilded forest in the sunshine, and following at the end of the procession came a hundred runners black as basalt, dressed in striped tunics of red and ochre and carrying long cedar staves. These were Ethiopians brought captive from the wars in Egypt and employed as beaters to rouse the lions

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from the jungles. They followed the chariots at an easy, swinging pace, as tireless as the wind.

Crowds of people had gathered in the streets to watch the passing of the King. A few Chaldeans of the better class mingled in the expectant throng, cone-tipped canes in their jeweled fingers, and engraved seals dangling from their wrists. Holding their embroidered robes daintily away from the pushing, shouting crowd of flat-nosed Babylonians, they bent low in salutation to Artaxerxes as he drove along. Here and there a litter bearing some Babylonian beauty and carried by red-skinned Egyptians halted while the royal chariot went by, and sometimes a jewelled hand would part the concealing curtains and an instant's vision of a bright uncovered face and dark curious eyes would flash upon the excited throng. The common people prostrated themselves in the dust at the sides of the streets, and arising after the procession had passed, fol-

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lowed the chariots shouting aloud, "Long live the King, Artaxerxes! King of Kings."

The cavalcade moved rapidly along over the great bridge of Semiramis, past the stupendous temple of Bel towering above its enclosing walls, and on to the open brazen gates of Nivitti-Bel, the inner wall of Babylon. The shouts of the people lingered pleasantly in the ears of the King as he left the city and emerged into the quieter suburbs. The mighty rampart rose sheer behind him, sweeping eastward and westward to the horizon's rim, while the sunlight falling upon the gigantic figures on the painted brickwork lighted them into a crude and blazing brilliancy, and above them the temples and palaces cut an eccentric pattern, prodigious, glittering, into the turquoise of the sky. Through waving corn-fields, past gardens of oranges and pomegranates, by villas and temples shining white and golden in the tropical green, the clanking

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calvacade rolled on. Before them the sullen mass of Imgur-Bel, the stupendous outer wall of Babylon—rose three hundred feet in air, casting a mighty shadow between them and the sunset. The neighing of the horses, the rattle of the harnesses, disturbed the quiet of the declining day. From the roofs and courtyards evening hymns arose, and the air was stirred to harmony, rising and falling like a melodious breeze. On the time towers the setting sun marked nightfall as they reached the outer wall, and the King and his huntsmen rolled through the gates out into the open plain. Artaxerxes's eyes ranged westward toward the sunset. A blazon of coral fire spread upward over all the sky in sweeping flame-like rays, and beneath and beyond the white clouds foamed, transparent, crystalline, like a shining sea. Far into the distance stretched the broad stream of the Euphrates, and again and yet again as far as the eye could reach the intersecting

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ribbons of the canals gave back the glory of the declining day.

The pleasure-loving King was happy, for who in the two kingdoms could equal him in huntsmanship? His thoughts leaped high as his eyes greeted the royal sun and he delighted in the swift rush of his horses. Foot to foot with them dashed the white steeds of Amytis, sister of the King. The royal beauty held the reins, disdainful of the charioteer who stood idly by her side. Behind her, swaying uncomfortably in the swiftly rolling chariot a long-robed eunuch held a golden umbrella over her head. Her beautiful arms, yellow and polished as ripe fruit, emerged from her wide embroidered tunic, which after the Babylonian custom was fastened over one shoulder only, leaving the right breast and shoulder free. A jewelled fillet was bound low about her brows. Her brilliant eyes, mobile, almond-shaped like her brother's, velvet-dark and exquisitely drawn as if by

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a pencil, were wide open and flashing with the joy of the chase. Her beauty was still in its perfection, but it was not that of a girl. The full curved lips were powerful as they were petulant. The face blazed with vitality and insolent pride. She stood far forward in her chariot holding the three horses with a light and practised hand, while her scarlet draperies streamed behind her in the swift wind of their flight, and her long black curls whipped about her face.

The King looked down upon Amytis with a bright glance of pleasure. In all his childish sports she had been his companion. While he was passing before the eyes of his people he had remained as calm as a sculptured idol, but now as they emerged into the open plain, leaving the city with its shouting crowds behind, the imperial face changed suddenly into that of a youth, smiling with joy at the prospect of his favorite sport. This latest monarch of the Achaemenian line was

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famed throughout Asia for his mighty stature and for his beauty, which was the very perfection of the aristocratic Persian race. As far as Greece, and in all the provinces of Italy and Asia Minor, Artaxerxes Longimanus was considered the most splendid monarch of his time. Spending the larger part of the year at Shushan—the capitol of his hereditary kingdom—he considered conquered Babylon as a winter residence, and brought to its palaces a luxurious Persian retinue, and with banquets and hunting festivals provided a constant and magnificent spectacle to the pleasure-loving Babylonians. It was his custom to follow the monthly hunts, but that which fell in Nisan, the month of flowers, was the important one of all the year. Now, lilies and tulips, poppies and flowers of every hue carpeted the Babylonian plain. The towering palms and tamarisks by the banks of the Euphrates and the intersecting canals were freshly green. The sun was bright,

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but tolerable. A few weeks later what was now a garden of flowers would be a desert, swept with burning winds and sand storms. So quickly did the merciless sun of summer destroy the beauty of the Spring.

But this was a day of all perfection, royally blue and gold. Golden temples, prodigious, towering, glittered in a bath of azure air. Beside them flowed the wide stream of the Euphrates, blue as the sky. Before them blazed the splendid sun, and the breath of the flowers was in their nostrils. Their chariot wheels rolled together as the six horses flew like wind across the plain.

"Ah, Amytis," cried the King, "why art thou not a man and my brother? No woman ever drove like thee."

"Safer thus," she answered, laughing back at him with a bold look from her long, narrow eyes, "I might have coveted thy throne and be hunting now with Darius,"—she paused a moment point-

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ing downward—"underground, by Datilla's flowering banks. By Nergal, the Euphrates is fair enough for me."

Artaxerxes frowned darkly. He had little wish to be reminded of that brother whose mysterious death had left the throne of Persia free to him, and he sent an angry glance at his sister, but she returned his threatening look quite carelessly, and suddenly his face cleared and he smiled again indulgently.

"By Bel, Amytis, thou art rash; but I love thee. Thou knowest it too well."

"'Tis well, brother," she answered, "on a day like this, it is easy to forget."

Then they laughed together like children, and the merry sound floated back to the following chariots. Their voices seemed to make the self-same music.

"Wilt not be tired?" he asked her, "We hunt tonight in the jungle at Acadou; 'tis far and we must reach it ere the moon rise."

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"Tired? I, thy sister! The night will not be long enough for me."

"As thou wilt, but I have commanded the barges to await us at the bending of the stream. We will return in them at sunrise."

"'Tis well. I care not; the day is long for slumber. But haste, Shamas declines in the sky; the way is long."

Violet shadows began to haunt the distances of the flowering plain. A cool breeze whispered in the branches of the palm-trees by the river, and rippled the surface of the water.

They bent lower over the rims of their chariots setting a faster pace. Just behind the King and Amytis, two men rode together in the fore front of the guard. One, a man of about sixty years, was unarmed with either javelin or bow. He was evidently not intending to take part in the chase except as a spectator. His features, classic in outline, with the characteristic straight brows and nose of

the Greek, contrasted strangely with his luxurious Persian dress. His eyes were piercingly black and shrewd, and his full lips smiled ironically. Beside him, standing forward in the chariot, was a young man in the first flower of youth. He was driving. No novice he seemed, although his handsome face was too finely modelled for a Babylonian. The straight nose and delicately curved lips proclaimed him of a different race. He was evidently one of the well-born, captive Jews, resident in Babylon. His scarlet dress indicated that he was in service at the palace. The clear brown eyes were bright with youth, but like an eagle's their glance was fierce and free. His thick and floating hair was powdered with gold dust and the young throat encircled about with a collar of emeralds and rubies was round and firm as unplucked fruit. As he stood poised in the rolling chariot his attitude was instinct with vitality and unconscious grace. He, too, seemed happy, as he

followed closely behind the chariots of the King and Amytis, and as he turned to speak to his chariot mate, his smile was full of deference and charm.

"A glorious day for sport, Themistocles. Right glad I am that thou art with us. These days were not meant for poring over musty Akkadian tablets. No, nor for casting horoscopes with thy grey-beard friends. Ah! Master, but the Spring is fair."

The Greek glanced at his young companion, but he seemed lost in a revery and did not reply, and although his lips smiled indulgently, his eyes were grave.

"Look, Master," the other cried again impulsively, "look at the sky. The sun God Shamas prepares himself a mighty banquet; Artaxerxes himself fareth not more gloriously."

Themistocles looked out to the blazing heavens. "Yes, Arrion," he said, "it is plain he goeth to a feast. Somewhere the Gods are joyous. But 'tis a joy

without this kingdom." He shook his head.

"What meanest thou, Themistocles?"

The Greek turned his eyes towards the chariot which was nearest to them and lowered his voice.

"We have notable company today. Alorus is bravely decked. Perchance the Princess smiles upon the captain of the guard. But hast thou marked Megabysus, her husband? Methinks the conqueror of Egypt should wear a happier look; Artaxerxes should not anger him. He is too powerful in Syria."

Arrion turned and scanned their faces.

He whom Themistocles had designated as the captain of the guard was a young Persian noble, one of the exquisites of the court. His hair was elaborately curled under a fillet adorned with the triple rosettes of his office. His handsome face was effeminate in type and his stained scarlet lips wore a self-satisfied smile. Beside him as he stood idly in the chariot

a tall man, Megabysus, drove in gloomy silence, holding with a firm grip the straining, scarlet reins. His warlike face was surmounted by a heavy, brazen helmet fashioned after the semblance of a horse's head. His brown skin was burnt almost to blackness by the suns of Egypt.

Arrion turned to answer his companion, unheeding his last words. "True, Master, and 'tis plain that if Amytis smiles upon Alorus, Megabysus frowns. How comes it that she rides with us to-day?"

"Ah, another of her caprices. Artaxerxes can refuse her nothing. Weak always where he loves is Longimanus; but generous, also, as thou knowest well."

"Even so. But sometimes I think, Themistocles, 'tis not the King who rules."

"By Bel, I pity Megabysus," continued Themistocles. "He is her very slave. If she were mine, by all the Gods, she should not leave the harem. I tell thee, Arrion, we have no such wives in Greece."

"'Tis a mighty warrior," answered Ar-

rion, regarding Megabysus with youthful admiration. "How comes it, Themistocles, the greater the man, the weaker with a woman?"

"Ah, but such a woman!" answered the Greek with an air of superior knowledge. "I have seen many and I tell thee, Arrion, she is the most beautiful woman in all Asia,—yes, and the most intemperate."

"How like she is to her brother," exclaimed Arrion, looking towards the King and Amytis, "they might have been born in the selfsame hour."

Like in more things than in their beauty, Arrion!"

"What meanest thou, Master?"

Themistocles looked keenly at his young companion. "Methinks she loves the King's cupbearer as much as the King himself. Oft have I seen her eyes upon thee, but thou heedest her little. What aileth thee, Arrion? Thou wert not ever so careless of their smile?"

The young Jew's mobile face flushed brightly under Themistocles' scrutinizing gaze, and he answered quickly, with a frown.

"I know the Princess well, Themistocles. Her looks are wandering as the wind. To-day, mayhap 'tis Arrion; to-morrow 'tis Alorus, or another."

"Beware thine own eyes wander not when she regards thee. I fear her fancy."

They were going at a rapid pace, the King and Amytis keeping just ahead of Arrion and Themistocles. As they reached a broad bend in the stream where the hard road-bed widened suddenly, the chariots came abreast. Amytis hailed them as they drew beside her and laying the lash of her whip over her quivering horses, she called a challenge to the King and to Arrion.

"Faster, faster!" her voice rang out like a silver horn note above the rushing of the chariot wheels. "Faster, faster, else we reach not Acadou ere the moon

rise. Wilt race with me?" she turned towards her brother, then threw a backward glance at Arrion, "Wilt race, Arrion?"

"Come, Arrion," cried the King, "see if thou canst outdrive us."

Arrion spoke to his willing horses and under the light touch of his reins they flew on under the waving palms.

The sound of shouts and laughter echoed over the broad river and roused the birds asleep among the branches.

Ever and anon Amytis turned her black eyes back upon her pursuer. Leaning forward in her chariot she called to her horses, who dashed madly on, excited by the oncoming rush of the following chariots. Little by little Arrion's chariot drew ahead and profiting by a bend in the road with a quick turn he gained the inner track and laid a sudden lash upon his horses. They leaped forward and the next instant he had distanced Amytis and the King.

"Well done, well done," cried Artaxerxes, generously pleased and smiling, "'twas neatly turned. My horses are fleetier than thine. Thou hast fairly out-driven us."

Arrion doffed his hunting cap and, bare-headed, flushed and smiling, guided his chariot to the side of the King.

"May the King live forever," he cried, bending low in thanks for the royal condescension, "to be loved by his servant."

Amytis bit her lip. It was she who had proposed this friendly contest.

They slackened their pace, for they had aroused a covert of quail in their rapid flight along the river bank, and one and another of the guard were trying their arrows against them. Wild asses fled before them across the darkening plain, and an occasional boar or jackal disappeared into the shadows with a growl. Suddenly a gazelle appeared and fled like a flash across their path. Amytis threw the reins to the charioteer and raising her

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bow without a moment's hesitation took aim and brought it to the ground.

"Hail to thee, sister," cried the King in delight, "thou shalt lead the sport to-night."

But Amytis looked again toward Arrion, who smiled carelessly, turning aside to speak to Themistocles. She frowned. How did the young Jew dare so to disregard her. Then laughing out defiantly she lashed her horses cruelly and was away.

The sun had quite disappeared behind the horizon, and the purple evening light had changed with the soft alchemy of the night into a luminous radiance under the rising moon.

It was a yellow half-moon, large and bright, floating like a golden coracle among the foamy wave-like clouds which hung about the horizon. The cavalcade had ridden hard and fast, and now the jungles of Acadou lay before them, skirting the river in a deep impenetrable green.

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Before them in a broad, open space stood the little temple of Nergal where the King and his retinue were to stop for their evening repast. It was a fantastic little edifice of baked and painted brickwork, more of a pavilion than an imposing place of worship, and its portico was decorated with the flowers of the tulip and with lotus blooms to invite them to repose. As they drew up to its open doors a company of priests clad in cool white linen with scarlet cone-shaped caps, came out to greet the royal guests.

The beaters meanwhile scattered in all directions in the thick jungle, to rouse the lions and drive them into the open.

A deep sleep lay over the river. Only the crisp rustling of the reeds, swaying in the mild night air, disturbed the silence; with now and again the shrill cry of a bittern, grieving in the nocturnal solitude. The moon rays rippled waveringly over the quiet bosom of the bending stream, changing to silver as the moon rose higher

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in the sky. It was growing late. The King became impatient at the delay, and Amytis' restless eyes looked anxiously towards the jungle. In the chariots drawn up in line under the shadow of the palm-trees which skirted the banks of the stream, the horses stirred impatiently. The bells in their bridle chains tinkled clearly in the stillness, and the cries from the jungle seemed nearer and more clear. The King left the porch of the temple and stooping, laid his ear to the ground.

"No sound of them yet," he called to Amytis, "'tis strange; I thought we should have had wind of them ere this."

Suddenly there rose a murmur like a sigh, prolonged and melancholy. It seemed at first like the night breeze among the branches, but it broke off short with a descending scale. Then it was repeated louder and louder, five or six times.

"At last," cried Arrion, starting to his feet, "the lion!"

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"Wait," answered Artaxerxes, "wait, he may not be alone."

There was an instant more of silence, and then there came a reply, distant it seemed but growing more and more distinct, and then another and yet another, taking up the sound, like the deep pipes in an organ answering in a fugue. And the sound grew and increased until it became a mighty, continuous roll, rhythmical, almost musical; with recurring climaxes of sound which declined again into prolonged sighs, ceasing on the night with a singular and almost human melancholy.

Arrion grasped Themistocles' hand in uncontrollable excitement, while Amytis leaped to the side of her brother where he stood without, in the broad flood of moonlight. A savage joy lit up their two faces.

"Ah!" cried the King with delight, "they go to water, and hark, how many! We shall have merry sport to-night."

The cries of the beaters grew louder and the thunderous refrain had ceased.