

There was a noise of crushing reeds; then suddenly a splendid lion dashed from the jungle. He paused as he came into the flooding moonlight. His yellow mane swept the ground, and as he caught sight of his enemies he growled with a hoarse, coughing sound, reluctant, menacing.

"Away, away," cried the King, "Megabysus, wilt thou mount with me? Alorus, go thou with Amytis, and see that thou protectest her."

The three chariots dashed at full speed towards the lion. Arrion and Themistocles came close behind. The chariots were fully equipped for the chase. At each huntsman's side the quiver filled with arrows was near to his hand, and at the back a long spear was fixed in its socket ready to parry an attack from behind. Artaxerxes was ahead. His guard knew better than to attempt to attack the prey before the monarch. The trained horses were as eager for the fight as were their masters. They dashed ahead without a

sign of fear, each muscle straining to its utmost speed, until they came within fifty yards of the crouching lion. Then with a cruel tug of the reins Artaxerxes threw them back upon their haunches, tossed the reins to Megabysus and set an arrow to his bow. Suddenly the lion leaped to his feet and with long, catlike bounds advanced to the attack. The quivering horses neighed with excitement, Artaxerxes raised his bow, and for an instant stood, silent and immobile as a statue. Then he let fly. The arrow sped straight to the lion's heart. A shout rose from the guard. Once more the King was foremost in the sport. The chariots of Amytis and Arrion drew alongside. They had not long to wait, for three more lions emerged together from the thicket and dashed towards them. Artaxerxes stood motionless in his chariot awaiting this approach. He had cast aside his bow and with careless courage stood until the lions were close upon him.



"The King is rash tonight," whispered Arrion to Themistocles, "and that lucky arrow has but made him bolder. He waits too long."

This time the lion who was nearest to the King came from the left and with a roar which rumbled through the air like thunder, swerved suddenly and leaped upon the back of the chariot. The King turned with infinite coolness to strike the foaming beast, when Megabysus, who was nearest and panicstricken for the King, plunged his dagger into the lion's throat. Artaxerxes' eyes blazed fire.

"How darest thou?" he cried, "'twas mine! by all the Gods, this shall cost thee dear."

Megabysus blanched under his bronzed skin. He knew too late that an insult to his huntsmanship would never be forgiven by the jealous King.

"Fool," cried Amytis shrilly, "Fool! canst thou lesson us in huntsmanship?"

"Out of my sight," thundered the King,

"I will take no interference." And he leaped to the ground and stood as at bay, waiting for the next attack. But now all was confusion. The angry roars of the lions, the neighing of the excited horses, mingled with the cries of the other combatants in the oncoming chariots, and filled the night with clamour.

Amytis had brought down one lion and Arrion with his spear was at close combat with the third. The creature though wounded was making a dangerous fight. Artaxerxes was, for the moment, alone, standing by the body of the lion slain by Megabysus. Suddenly a savage roar startled the expectant King, but it came from the rear. He turned quickly to face the oncoming leap of a lioness, who had advanced stealthily upon him to avenge the slaughter of her mate. Was it anger at the interference of Megabysus or a rash wish to show his prowess? The King waited an instant's space too long, his javelin missed its throw and with a ter-



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rible blow from her powerful paw, the lioness stretched Artaxerxes unconscious at her feet. Arrion at a distance had descended from his chariot and was in the thick of his combat with his wounded foe. Amytis was the only one whose weapons were free. With a cry of rage and terror she leaped to the side of her brother. Alorus rushed to her assistance but she cried out furiously, "Mine, mine, I will avenge my brother."

Across the body of the King the lioness looked at the woman. They measured each other with their eyes. Another instant and the lioness had leaped to the attack. Amytis was armed only with a dagger as she stood fearlessly and faced the raging beast. About her the palm trees made a circle of shadow, but in the open space where she stood the moonlight fell as bright as day. The movements of the woman and the lioness were graceful, catlike, similar. With sinuous, hypocritical feints and sudden bounds they joined

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the combat. Amytis' blazing eyes were fixed upon the red eyeballs which glared furiously in her face. They parried each other's thrusts with astonishing dexterity, the lioness with her formidable paw, the woman with her dagger. The contest lasted for an eternity, so it seemed to the band of soldiers who stood back in dire consternation, daring not to interfere. They feared that the strength if not the skill of the woman would yield the first; but Amytis' arm as it flashed with its jewelled weapon back and forth in graceful feline sweeps, seemed made of steel. The lioness whipped her tail upon her quivering flanks and roared again and again.

A sudden whiff of wind blowing fresher in the deepening night tossed the branches of the palm trees. A shadow fell across Amytis' eyes and a long lock of her hair floated across her bared shoulder and blew into her face. She raised her hand to brush it away, and in that instant with



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a growl the lioness gripped her arm and with a quick snatch of her terrible paw tore away the tunic from her shoulder; another blow and she had brought the Princess to her knees. At this moment Arrion, victorious, had drawn his dripping javelin from the body of his fallen foe, and emerged from the shadow of the palm trees just in time to see Amytis on her knees before the lioness, her right arm disabled, torn and bleeding. He dashed forward with his spear upraised, and in his flight his quick thought realized that there was no time to set and speed an arrow; no time to reach her side with his dagger. His only chance was to throw the dripping weapon which he held in his hand. Alorus and others of the guard seemed paralyzed with fright, and although advancing, were fatally far away. There was but one chance,—the spear,—one throw for her life. Could he trust his eye and hand at such a distance? No choice. He raised his weapon and it

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sped, straight as an arrow, flashing suddenly in the moonlight. A whizz and then a thud. It struck the lioness in her side and brought her to the ground. Another instant and Amytis, freed, with a dexterous left-hand stroke buried her own weapon in the throat of the lioness. It was the last effort of her strength, for when Arrion reached her side, with a sigh she reeled and fell fainting upon the dead body of her foe.

By this time Alorus and his soldiers had reached the spot, with Themistocles who bent over the still unconscious King. And soon the other chariots drew near and they were surrounded by an excited crowd lamenting and crying aloud with exclamations of consternation and despair. Themistocles and Arrion alone were calm, and the latter, watching intently the pale features of the King, motioned them to silence for he saw that he was stirring to consciousness. But when he opened his eyes they fell upon a terrifying sight.



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The two lions were dead indeed, but Amytis, white and apparently lifeless, lay in the arms of Arrion. Artaxerxes groaned and tried feebly to rise.

"Fear not, Oh King," cried Themistocles, "Amytis lives. Arrion hath saved her."

The young Jew bent over Amytis, white-faced and breathing quickly, he lifted her head upon his arm. The black mass of her hair flowed back from her face. She looked helpless and weak, and once more womanly. Suddenly her dark eyes unclosed, gazing appealingly into Arrion's face.

"Fear not, Princess," he answered soothingly, "The King lives, and thou art safe."

A look of joy spread over her face, as she gazed into his softened, tender eyes, then smiling bravely, she struggled to her feet, Arrion still supporting her.

"I thank thee, Arrion," she cried in her clear voice, "I owe thee my life." And

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with an imperial gesture, she held out her arm to the lips of the young Jew. Blood was dripping from its smooth surface where the the claws of the lioness had torn it. He bent his head and kissed away the ruddy drops.

"Ah!" she breathed joyfully in his ear, "Ah, Arrion, not yet shalt thou forget Amytis."

Then she turned to Artaxerxes.

"Art wounded, brother? I thought to save thee. By Nergal, some witch hath burned our images to-day." Artaxerxes rose painfully, and stood, leaning on the arm of Themistocles.

"I spoke naught of it to thee, Amytis, but in truth a raven flew by the terrace this morning early, and then the sunset yesterday,"—the King's voice dropped to a low whisper,—"didst mark it? 'Twas a threatening sky. I heeded not these omens."

"Rash always, brother," replied Amytis, reproachfully, "forgetful of the Gods



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and of their warnings. We must make rich offerings that they have spared us."

"Thy words are wise, Amytis," said the King, "but Arrion, how shall we thank him?" He turned to the youth with a smile, and held out his hand. "'Twas thou, the youngest of us all who saved my sister. I thank thee, Arrion, for her life."

The young cup-bearer flushed quickly and his eyes sparkled with pride and joy. Rarely did the great King offer his hand to a subject. He bent and kissed it reverently, and then with a grave submission bent his knee and laid his glowing face at the King's feet.

"What skill thy servant hath," he answered, "was given him at thy hands, oh, Master of my life. Take that also when thou hast need of it."

"May Merodach protect thee, Arrion," answered the King, looking lovingly upon his young favourite. "Thou art pleasing in my sight."

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Then he turned to his sister, who stood near him. She seemed quite forgetful of the curious soldiers who stood about her, bending a look of undisguised and passionate admiration upon Arrion, as he knelt before them in his youthful beauty, his grave, unconscious grace.

"Thou art grateful, Amytis. Think not but I will reward him. Remember, sister, I owe him a life." So saying he faltered and his eyes grew dim. "Ah," he groaned, "'twas a blow that lion gave me. Are the boats ready? We must haste to the palace."

At the brink of the river the royal barge awaited the King's pleasure to convoy him gently down the stream. Behind came other boats, commanded to carry the King's suite homeward. Artaxerxes leaned heavily on the arm of Themistocles as he walked slowly toward the river's edge.

"Come Amytis," he cried; "our boat awaits thee, sister. Alorus, Themis-



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toes, wilt follow after? The wind is fresh and bloweth towards the city. We shall go quickly. Come Arrion, again I thank thee."

II

The moon was fading in the sky and the shadows of the night were lessening towards the dawn, as the King's barge, floating easily down the smooth stream of the Euphrates, approached the city gates. It was a beautiful vessel, long and shallow as befitted the quiet river, and constructed of ebony richly carved and inlaid with ivory and silver. The prow, a dromedary of gilded ivory, glittered under the rays of the waning moon, and the stern, a painted serpent in green and silver, raised its head above the rippling water. The purple sails, swelling gently in the night breeze, were embroidered with a blazonry of gold and scarlet and at the mast floated the royal ensign of the Chaldean kings, Nergal the hunter god, in a golden circle on his flying bull.