

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

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.

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In the center of the vessel Artaxerxes lay upon a golden-footed couch, lifted above the deck on a dais and covered with bright Persian embroideries. He lay wearily among the cushions looking out upon the stream in a dreamy silence. Amytis on a couch beside him, had fallen into a restless slumber, a woman-slave who had awaited her in the royal barge, had bound her wounded arm and now stood near her waving a fan of peacock feathers before her face. Far behind in the stern of the vessel Arrion and Themistocles sat together on an ivory seat made soft with tasselled cushions of many coloured tapestry.

Standing high above them, the steersman plied the long pole which directed their passage through the smooth water, while towards the prow the oarsmen bent to their task. Their heavy features, with the characteristic full lips and rounded aquiline nose of the early Babylonians, bespoke the mixture of the Akkadian and

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the Ethiopian race. Their large eyes were dreamy as those of children. They sang as they rowed to a monotonous, repeated rhythm, songs to the river god and to the moon. The lazy, crooning sound, the regular dip of the oars, fell soothingly upon the silence of the waning night.

Themistocles and Arrion as they sat together spoke in low tones for fear of disturbing the slumbers of Amytis.

A warm friendship existed between the aged Greek and the young Jew. During the winter months which Themistocles spent habitually in Babylon at the court of Artaxerxes, they had passed many days together. After the victory of Salamis, the exiled general had fled to Persia. Jealous of his too great power, resentful of his self-praise and distrustful of his genius, ungrateful Athens had sent him forth; and Artaxerxes had received him, had given him Magnesia for his maintenance and loaded him with honours. Themistocles

with readiness adapted himself to the customs of the court, had quickly learned the Persian language, became learned in astronomy, astrology and in the ancient literature of the Akkadians, and profiting by the unusual permission granted him by the indulgent monarch had been initiated in the jealously guarded wisdom of the Magi. His eager mind delighted in these studies, but among the luxurious nobles of Artaxerxes' court he had looked in vain for sympathy or understanding. They saw him loaded with honours and benefits, wearing the royal signet and the robe of the King's sons-in-law. Arrion alone saw in his aging face the unforgotten bitterness of his exile, his unforgotten love for the country which had exiled him. Themistocles loved him. In Arrion's impulsive youth he caught a gleam of his own boyhood, and he delighted to instruct him in the arts of war and in the lore of the Chaldeans. Long days they passed together in the college of the Chaldees

at Sippara, poring over the engraved cylinders of Akkad; long nights upon the temple tower of Nebo, they read the mysteries of the stars, seeking in the heavens to find the secrets of the gods.

Arrion returned this love and kindness by a youthful reverence and admiration, very grateful to the sore heart of the great general. He endeared himself to Themistocles, as to his royal master by the peculiar charm of a temperament at once amiable and independent. In all the luxuries of the court he had kept his national characteristics singularly untouched, and although hardly more than a boy had already shown a nature full of strength and promise. Brought to the notice of Artaxerxes by Nehemiah, the Jewish lawgiver and general, he found favour in the sight of the King; and had been exalted to serve with Nehemiah as cupbearer at the royal table. At the side of the indulgent monarch he had ridden to the chase, Artaxerxes himself teaching him the arts

of huntsmanship and how to guide the fleet horses in the swiftly rolling chariot. But as he grew to manhood the luxuries and revels of the court began to trouble him with their soft seductions, and the bright glances which were cast upon him as he passed in and out of the long, cool corridors of the palace, disturbed his calm and youthful dreams. It was well known that Amytis had singled him out for favour, and Themistocles, who loved him, feared for his safety and warned him. Not lightly would Arrion escape the vengeance of the capricious beauty should he fail to respond to her fancy; not easily would he emerge from the soft bondage of her smile should he once yield to it.

Themistocles was pondering these things, sitting beside his young companion as they floated towards the city. He knew too well the power of the Princess over her brother, and he feared for Arrion.

He turned to him and laid a caressing hand upon his shoulder. "I know not

whether to be glad for thee or no, for this day's sport, Arrion," he said in a low voice. "Thy hand was far too skillful."

Arrion looked up and shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "Ah," he answered, "'twas not for me to choose."

"I know, Arrion, I know, but thinkest thou the princess will love thee less?"

"I know not, master," he replied turning away to avoid the keen eyes of his friend.

"I saw thee, as she lay fainting in thy arms, saw her eyes also when they opened gladly on thy face. Methinks she would offer that fair arm to the lioness, for another kiss like that I saw thee give her."

Arrion's young face flushed at this. "'Tis a woman," he said, looking towards Amytis as she lay asleep under the moonlight, "helpless and wounded."

"Yes, yes, I know. I cannot wonder at thee, but I have warned thee. There is danger in her smile."

"Danger? I can but meet it when it

comes. At least I will never be a slave to all these Babylonian superstitions. Didst hear the King when he spoke of the sunset?"

"Yes, I heard him. He is as superstitious as any woman, but didst mark it yesterday? In truth it was a threatening sky."

"Well, I remember it, for I coursed all day with Beladon the chief eunuch, with the King's dogs for quail, and we returned at evening by the city walls and from their height I saw the sun set. Shamas was mighty, great with pride, grown twice his size, and three great rays of bluish light, shining as silver cut the heavens like swords."

"Hast thou forgotten the portent? 'When Shamas grows twice his size and waves his sword, then there is danger, and to whom, Arrion?'"

"Ah, to the King! I had forgotten. 'Tis on the cylinders at Borsippa, and when Balshazzar was overthrown by the great

Cyrus there was such a portent, and again, when Artabanus murdered Xerxes, the King's father. Yet it meaneth naught, Themistocles, Artaxerxes is kind to the Babylonians, he is beloved of his own people, the Persians, and the Medes all honour him."

"True, Artaxerxes is kind; Longimanus the mild, rules well and wisely, unless he yields to others." Themistocles paused a moment and turned his eyes to Arrion. "Hast thou noticed him of late? Hast watched him closely since Megabysus returned from Egypt?"

"Artaxerxes and the queen mother," replied the youth, "play much at dice, Amytis looking over Hamestris' shoulder and anon whispering to her mother."

"True, thou hast seen, and Megabysus;—what of him?"

"Megabysus," answered Arrion, "is ever as thou seest him tonight; he has lost the proud mien he had when he first brought King Inarus back with him from Egypt.

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The memory of his victories seemeth not to comfort him."

"Will the King listen when he speaks?" asked Themistocles.

"No," replied Arrion, "he plays ever at dice with Hamestris. Hath he no weightier matters? Why dallies he so at play?"

"The great King knoweth his own will. No one may question it."

"I fear Hamestris and her daughter," whispered Arrion, "they are ever with the King."

"Thou art wise, boy. They are vengeful, these women, and too powerful with Artaxerxes. I like not that women should know aught of governments or kingdoms. 'Twas enough that Hamestris should have ruled one King. She was ever on the back of Xerxes, riding him like an evil demon. And now her son. Thou art too young, my lad, to know the scandals of the court of Artaxerxes' father, but this woman is implacable, jealous, ferocious as a wild-cat.

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Powerful, too, and subtle. Megabysus may well fear her. She will never forgive the death of the young Achaemenides. Didst know how hardly Megabysus saved his head?"

"I heard it whispered, Master," answered Arrion, "but could scarcely believe it. Would she have the King reward his victorious general with death?"

"Death or exile," replied Themistocles with a bitter smile; "such are the rewards of victory."

Arrion looked at Themistocles and was silent, fearing to speak of the disgrace which had whitened his proud head.

"Megabysus lives, but his word will not avail to save the Egyptian King," continued Themistocles. "The King, whose arrows slew Hamestris' son."

"And if the King should yield?" asked Arrion in deep concern.

"Then is there danger to Artaxerxes, for Megabysus has given his word to Inarus, that he shall not die. He will not