

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

to the sky. Arrion alighted with Themistocles, and followed the King and Amytis as they walked towards the palace.

"Ah, Themistocles," sighed Arrion, raising his young face to the soft radiance of the dawning day, "Ah, Master! Spring is sad."

III

It was the first quarter of the day. The water-clock had dropped a single pebble into its resounding basin, and the courtyard of a large dwelling in the Jews' quarter echoed faintly to this matinal music. It was the house of Mariamne, widow of Zamanadin, a banker among the captive Jews, who had grown rich in the abundant commerce of Babylon. Dying in full manhood, he had left this large house and an ample fortune to his widow and to Miriam, his only child.

To comfort her solitude and occupy the long days of her widowhood, Mariamne continued her busy occupations and had become proficient in the art of weaving the brilliant carpets for which Babylon was famous, and with which it was her pleasure to adorn her house. She excelled also



*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

in the embroidery of cunningly-wrought garments such as were the customary apparel of the rich women of the city. Miriam, her daughter, was gently nurtured and protected with jealous care from the knowledge of the free and luxurious life of the Babylonian women. In all the arts of housewifery, she was an apt pupil of her mother, weaving and embroidering skillfully, devices of her own design, and she had been carefully taught by her father to recite long passages in the Talmud, and like any student of Sippara, had learned to write Akkadian and to copy the legends of the Babylonian mythology on tablets of clay. She delighted in the story of that Adapa who broke the wings of the South wind, and in the long tales of Gilgamesh and Idzubar, and would sing them to her harp. Her young mind was fed only on poetry and the religion of her fathers and her young body nurtured only on the fair fruits of the earth. So she grew, clear-minded and beautiful as a flower and as

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

she reached maidenhood was betrothed by her father to Arrion, her kinsman, according to the laws and customs of her people. But Zamanadin, already seized with the malady which ended his life, hardly survived the betrothal banquet, and funeral rites succeeded quickly to feasting in the house of the Jew. The marriage had been delayed when Arrion had been commanded to service in the palace of Artaxerxes and Mariamne had not passed the first year of her widowhood when her daughter had been summoned to the Court, and had been guarded by Hamestris, the Queen-mother, for service in the harem. No difficulties beset the exiled Jews, as did the task of preserving their women from the influences and even the religious customs of Babylon. The temple of Ishtar stood wide, a menace to every free-born woman who dwelt in the scarlet city. Thus far Mariamne and her daughter had escaped the infamous law which demanded their presence in the groves of the Chal-



dean Aphrodite. Mariamne never spoke to Miriam of the rites which were celebrated in honour of the goddess, and always when they passed the open gates of the temple enclosure, she drew the veil over the face of her young daughter. But not easily had they escaped. Well Mariamne remembered the day when the priests of Ishtar knocked at the outer door of the court, demanding her presence and that of her daughter in the groves of the accursed temple. But her husband was alive then and strong to protect them; with his dagger drawn he had stood before his wife and daughter, threatening to slay them in the sight of the priests if they dared to lay their hands upon them. She had not forgotten the days of torture and suspense which followed before the instant intercession of Nehemiah had gained the clemency of Artaxerxes, and immunity from the law of the insatiate goddess.

But Zamanadin was dead, and Mariamne had no wit or means to withhold

her daughter when the Queen-mother summoned her to the palace. So she was doubly bereft and in her grief and anxiety applied herself more than ever assiduously to the direction of her maidens in weaving, and to her long practised embroidery.

When the spring was young and the heats of summer still tarried over the plains, it was her custom to descend early from the roof of her dwelling where she slept, and to ply her work in the courtyard. She dreaded the burning days of summer when she was compelled to take refuge in the dark lower chambers of the house, which were damp and ventilated only by the slim towers which let in a thin current of air from without. So while the mornings were still fresh, she descended the diagonal stairway of enameled brick work which led outside the house, and as the first sunrays glittered on the gilded cornices she ordered her maidens to the looms which were set in the shadowed



*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

corner of the court, and applied herself to her embroidery.

Clad in the clinging dress of the Babylonian women, two dark hand-maidens plied the loom. One cast the shuttle in and out, the other, stooping, held the brilliant woof in place. The scarlet fringes of their robes swayed with their movements, and the long brown arms of the skillful Tirzah, she who plied the shuttle, moved with a regular graceful sweep, as the texture grew under her hands.

Mariamne, seated near them, looked up frequently to direct their weaving, while her hands were busy on a robe of golden tissue, over which she had begun to trace a fantastic pattern of tulips and palm leaves. She sat in a high carved chair of ivory, her sandalled feet supported on a stool. As she bent low over her work, the wimple or veil which bound her brow floated about her, casting a light shadow over her thin dark face. An Indian dog lay at her feet, his brown sleek head

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

couched against the scarlet sandals. The courtyard was very still. Above the fantastic gilded carving of the house, the cloudless eastern sky glowed with the solid gemlike blue of the turquoise. On the gateway, curved inward like a half moon, an ibis stood, motionless as the sculptured monsters which surmounted the heavy painted doors. The broad leaves of the date palm under which Mariamne sat, shone with a light transparent green in the early sunlight, but were still and motionless, unstirred by any breeze. Only the noise of the shuttle, passing in and out disturbed this morning stillness. Mariamne's needle, plied by her skillful fingers left a glowing trace upon the golden stuff which fell about her. She worked on mechanically, while her anxious thoughts dwelt with her absent child. The girls began to whisper to each other, noting with love and sympathy the sadness and abstraction of their mistress. Mariamne looked up.



BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

"Judith," she said chidingly, "thou art careless, girl! The corner of the woof is far from level. Why whispereth thou with Tirzah?"

"Pardon, Mistress," whispered the maid bending again to the loom, "but Tirzah hath just told me that she saw a white dog in the courtyard as we descended from the roof. I saw it not," she spoke excitedly, "but Tirzah saith truly that it was there by the fountain."

"Why, will ye heed these Babylonian omens, foolish maidens and superstitious?"

"Superstitious? Even so, Mistress," broke in Tirzah turning towards Mariamne, while she continued the regular cast of the shuttle, "but 'tis the same omen which we saw when the lord Zamanadin went from us, and again when thy daughter —" she paused.

"I know, Tirzah, I know, but it is not meet that we should listen to these signs and warnings, the follies of blasphemers

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

and idol-worshippers; heed them not." Her voice was firm, but as she bent again to her work the maidens saw that her face was troubled.

Presently she spoke again, for a swift shadow passed over the stuff which lay upon her knee, and there was a sudden fluttering of wings in the balcony of the house.

"What was it," she cried, "I saw a shadow passing, was it a bird? Oh! Tirzah, Judith, look among the doves. Has the lost one returned? Oh, look!"

The two maidens fled together up the stairway to the dovecote in the balcony and with a flutter of flying hair and dresses, laughing and joyous, caught a dark winged dove and bore it triumphantly to their mistress. Mariamne took it in her eager hands.

"Oh, wonderful, wonderful!" her dark eyes flashed joy, "it is her dove, Miriam's dove! And here is a message," and she took from the throat of the bird a



BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

tiny tablet of clay, freshly engraved, from which she read aloud to the maidens.

"Be comforted, my mother; Amytis favoureth me. Wait, for Miriam cometh."

"Oh, joyful news, joyful news!" she cried, kissing the smooth, dark head of the bird and holding it to her throat, "Go Judith, go Tirzah, prepare her chamber, gather flowers. Oh, blessed, blessed, dove!"

Then there was hurrying and the bustle of preparation in the house of Mariamne, and she herself with a happy flush on her cheek, sat silently watchful, holding the bird in her tender, caressing hands, and her embroidery fell from her unheeded, while she waited for the expected child.

"Is she really coming, Mistress? When thinkest thou that she will come? Will it be this very day that we shall see her?" So the maidens questioned Mariamne, loving the absent child with a jealous devotion almost like her mother's. And they spread a feast of fruit and wine and

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

wove long garlands of flowers, laughing merrily in joyous expectation and talking the while about their young mistress.

"How joyful if we can really see her once again!" said Tirzah. "Mindest thou, Judith, how she was wont to look up from her tablets, chiding us with a smile?"

"All smiles have stopped since she went from us," answered the other.

"And when she played at graces," continued Tirzah, "who could throw the rib-boned hoop so straight or far as she?"

"She was ever merry with us, Tirzah," said Judith, turning towards the door. "Come, let us look. Even now, perchance, she cometh."

Thus, ever and anon, they would run to the high gateway of the court and pushing open the heavy cedar doors with their slim brown arms, peer out with happy expectant faces to scan the street distances for a sign of Miriam. And the minutes, which before had fled so rapidly in the quiet routine of their work, seemed