

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

"There is naught that thou nor I can do. Watch, Arrion, and be patient."

The eyes of the court were turned upon the maiden, and again a murmur of wonder and admiration spread about the hall. A long mantle embroidered in fantastic, symbolical devices hung from her shoulders, trailing behind her as she advanced and disclosing a thin dress of gauze, which enraptured her like a jewelled mist. About her waist was hung a bronze mirror, and an ointment bottle of azure glass. A necklace of emeralds, oval-shaped and engraved with her name, encircled her throat, and her hair, blue-black as a falcon wing, was dressed high and held in place by a carven comb of lapis lazuli, blue as the shadows of her curls. She stepped slowly forward and the chainlet which bound her ankles made a little clicking sound on the marble floor. So, holding her fan, she stood silently before the King, and the whiteness of her brow

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and of her drooping eyelids was as jasmine flowers.

"Ah, Miriam! Thou art fair!" exclaimed the King and amorously he leaned towards her, his godlike features flushed and smiling. "Wilt sit by my side, Miriam? I would honour thee."

Miriam lifted her eyes and cast an appealing glance at Amytis, who whispered impatiently to the frightened girl.

"Go, Miriam. 'Tis madness to refuse the King. Be not afraid. I will protect thee."

With a sigh Miriam moved closer to the couch of the King and sank upon the stool at his feet.

"And now," said Artaxerxes, "let there be music and dancing."

Above in the gallery the flutes began to an accompaniment of harps, dulcimers and psalteries, while from behind the curtains came a band of dancing girls, bought in the market-place. Nabatians, Syrians, Elamites and Greeks, clad in transparent

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golden gauze, their arms and ankles tinkling with a weight of jewelled rings and bracelets. Around their waists were hung tambourines which they struck with a monotonous rhythm as they slowly began to dance. Among the curling smoke wreaths of the censers they moved with waving arms, weaving the graceful figures in and out among the couches of the guests, to the sound of smitten tambourines and cymbals. Attendants moved from couch to couch offering wine and more wine, while slim slave boys bore aloft baskets of flower-wreaths to crown the guests. Upon the table burned the sacred candlesticks brought from Jerusalem, amid a multitude of golden vessels, wine-cups and amphora, filled with perfumed water. Viands, luxurious and costly, were surrounded with wreaths of lilies and of tulips, and the carven wine cups were crowned with woven chaplets of anemone and parsley. Slaves brought in baskets of river reeds filled with bread ground from the lotus seed,

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white and light as snow. On platters of colored pottery were served haunches of venison and stuffed birds; the flaming flamigo and the white winged heron, ducks, and blue throated pigeons, on dishes of silver, sea fish from the far mouth of the Tigris, bebradon, carp and barbel, and the small and succulent "scorpen" with its multicoloured shell. Of these the guests ate, choosing the best morsels for themselves and leaving the rest to the slaves. Arrion, who stood beside the King, filling from time to time his wine cup, watched Miriam with love and fear, for the King was drinking deeply and was amorous with wine, and he bent over Miriam, leaning ever nearer and yet nearer.

"Dost thou need a mirror, Miriam," said the King, "When thou hast so many eyes to tell thee of thy beauty?" And he leaned over her shoulder, and taking up the mirror, which hung at the maiden's girdle, he held it before her face.

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"See, Miriam," he said, "thou art the moon, beautiful as the lady Ishtar and I the sun. The priests wait for an eclipse! Behold it!" And suddenly he bent back her lovely head and kissed her, and he laughed joyfully, pleased with the jest, while the guests murmured with surprise, and then applauded, seeing that the monarch was content.

Themistocles grew grave but motioned silence to Arrion, who had stepped forward his hand upon his sword, rashly forgetful and infuriated. Themistocles raised his hand—

"O King," he said, "May thy servant speak? I am a stranger in thy court, but in all the cities of Greece I have not seen such a feast, such music, or such dancing. But I have heard much of the skill of Amytis thy sister in the dance and well know I the dexterity of Simon of Athens upon the flute. Will the King command that Amytis dance to Simon's fluting?"

Artaxerxes looked graciously upon

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Themistocles, and waving his sceptre he gave orders that Amytis should dance. Rising slowly to her feet, Amytis left the side of Hamestris and advanced to the center of the hall. Miriam, trembling at the side of Artaxerxes, looked in confusion and astonishment upon her. Surely this was not the gracious Princess who had promised to help and protect her, this woman, who with a reckless gesture cast aside her imperial crown and veil, and clad only in her robe of transparent gauze stood thus in all her shameless beauty before the court of her brother. The splendid arms were all of a pale yellow like gold, or the ripe richness of fruit, her blackened eyes shone with a velvety fire, languorously defiant, her cheeks and lips were richly scarlet; as beautiful and alluring, all afire with reckless excitement, she took her place before the guests.

From the gallery, Simon, clad in a Grecian dress of white and purple, descended with his flute, and all the others,

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the dancing girls, and the Ethiopian slaves, forming in a circle about her, struck a monotonous accompaniment upon the tambourines, and slowly the woman began to dance. First there was a quiver of her heavy eyelids, half veiling the long dreamy eyes, while her slim hands, laden with rings moved in glittering curves about her, and her feet just stirred upon the marble floor. Then with a shudder her splendid body seemed to wake to life, and around and about the figure of the flute player standing like a statue in the middle of the room, she moved languidly, invitingly, while the flute notes clear and birdlike, spoke of spring pastures and of moonlit woods. Then the dance became descriptive, passionate, and Artaxerxes moved from Miriam's side and gazed upon his sister with a look of mingled rage and joy, while she, Amytis, wife of Megabysus, but royal courtesan of the Babylonian court, displayed her wonderful art. Faster and faster she danced,

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and faster and more furious grew the sound of the tambourines and cymbals, while the soldiers and the guests cast aside their garlands, threw down their wine cups and crowded nearer and nearer to Amytis. The flute notes died away, lost in the clamour, and Artaxerxes himself strode with an uncertain step towards the dancer, Miriam, unperceived, fled to Arrion's side in terror, and there was a mighty noise and tumult and the air was clamorous with sound and heavy with the perfumed smoke of the censers, the odour of the dying flowers. The floor was stained with wine from the fallen wine-cups, while Amytis, luring and splendid, drew all eyes, dancing, dancing in a passionate delirium of entrancing motion, of shameless grace.

Miriam, who had never been present at such a feast, covered her eyes, and clung trembling to the arm of Arrion. The veins in her temples throbbed with terror and excitement, and Arrion whispering in

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her ear urged her to flee. Hamestris having drunken deeply sat helpless in her chair, sunk in a heavy slumber, her old face swollen and revolting. The eunuchs had also fallen asleep, having feasted overmuch and were now helpless; some reclining against the couches and some lying prone along the floor. But the others, the soldiers and the guards, intoxicated and raging, crowded together about Amytis. Arrion could see them close together with their curled black beards and almond eyes, aflame and bloodshot, leaning, crowding, towards the woman. Towards the left in their flounced white garments, their purple fillets fallen away, the priests leered from their couches.

"Come with me," whispered Arrion with his arm about Miriam, "come, my dove, my pure one, the King has forgotten thee, Hamestris and the eunuchs are quite helpless. We may escape!" And they stole towards the door, when sud-

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denly the curtain which hung before the entrance was pushed aside, and a man, fiery eyed, and of commanding stature confronted them. He was haggard with fatigue, and there was dust upon his sandals, and on his curling board.

"Arrion," he said in a clear voice of authority and reproach, "where goest thou?"

Arrion sank upon his knees, and kissed the hem of his garment. "Father," he said, "Nehemiah! Pardon, I would save the maiden, the feast is shameless, the King is drunken, and Amytis inflames the people. Let us go!"

"Not so, Arrion," said Nehemiah, "return. I am with thee. Thou mayest not depart. I have a message for the King which concerns our people. Return, desert not thy post."

Like a wind of pure air blowing through the chamber, the presence of the prophet passed through the drunken crowd; and as Nehemiah advanced, the soldiers drew back, and Amytis sank exhausted at the

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feet of her mother, with a defiant look on her flushed face. The priests gazed angrily at the intruder. The King alone stood silent, sobered, and his countenance was threatening as he gazed at Nehemiah, entering thus travel-worn and in garments unfit for feasting. But as the Jew advanced he held out his sceptre in sign that he would hear him. Nehemiah bent his head to the feet of Artaxerxes, and rising again he spoke.

"O King, live forever! May thy countenance be clement to thy servant."

"Why comest thou, Nehemiah?" answered the King, "in dusty garments unfit for feasting? Why is my cupbearer absent from the feast of Mithras?"

And Nehemiah answered :

"O King! May thy reign be everlasting, thy servant hath journeyed far, and he is weary and cast down."

"Why art thou sad, seeing that thou art not sick; why leave thy office to the lad Arrion? I am displeased."

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"O Artaxerxes! May thy servant tell thee of his sorrow? The King feasted."

Artaxerxes raised his hand and the musicians ceased, and there was no longer the sounds of flutes, and the psalteries and dulcimers were silent.

"Speak! Nehemiah, I hear thee."

Nehemiah stood before the King and spoke. In his eyes was the sombre fire of the reformer and fanatic, in his large stern features the pride and power of the soldier and the priest. His gestures were nobly graceful and commanding. His voice rang through the silent hall like smitten bronze, sonorous and penetrating.

"O Artaxerxes! Live forever! Thy servant will relate to thee the sorrow, and the great anguish and shame that is upon him. Since the month of Chisleu the heart of that servant has been heavy and sore oppressed, for as I was walking without the walls of Shushan, before that the King and his court had journeyed to Baby-

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lon, alone as I was walking without the city, certain of my brethren came to me. Hanani, my brother and others, who had been to Jerusalem, and I asked them, O King, concerning my brethren who had remained in Jerusalem, and about the temple of our God, and concerning the wall of our holy city, and they answered me, oh King, that the word of Cyrus, which he spoke, concerning the rebuilding of the temple, had not been fulfilled, the ruins of the holy house of our God still lie desolate. The walls are broken down and the gates are burnt with fire, and the remnant of the people are afflicted, sore at heart and grievously cast down."

Artaxerxes flushed still with wine was quick to anger, and he broke in upon the words of Nehemiah.

"And why is the word of Cyrus disobeyed? Why build not the people their temple according to the command of the great Cyrus?"

"Thou knowest, O King! that the

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Samaritans war against the people of Jerusalem; that they did sow distrust in the mind of Darius and of Xerxes, thy father, and that the golden altars, and the brazen sea stand even now before Bel's temple, even now the candlesticks of our holy temple," and Nehemiah pointed angrily at the tables, "deck the feast of thy god, O King."

"What is thy will, Nehemiah?" asked the King.

The Jew bent again to the feet of Artaxerxes.

"O King! if thy servant has found favour in thy sight, seek thou for the scroll of Cyrus, the king, which is in the library of Sargon at Sippara, and send me, even me, thy servant to Jerusalem, that I may rebuild the temple and the walls of the city."

Artaxerxes paused a moment, and Themistocles, who knew him well, marked with eagerness the shifting of the eye, the uncertain lips, as they opened to reply,