

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

knowing that any wave of motive, any caprice might decide the fate of Nehemiah and his people; but Artaxerxes had regretted the insult he had weakly put upon Megabysus, and it pleased him to be gracious.

"Rise, Nehemiah," he said, extending once more the royal sceptre. "Go gather thy people together, thou shalt have a guard of horsemen to accompany thee. Timber will I give thee from my forests, and gold; letters also to Asaph and the governors of the provinces. Rebuild thou the temple and thy holy city; the word of Cyrus shall prevail!"

Nehemiah arose, a strange figure among the voluptuous courtiers of the Persian king. Grey haired and bearded, reverend and yet warlike, he stood with a proud simplicity in the midst of the court, and in his eyes was an expression of rapturous joy. He turned to Arrion and Miriam and spoke again.

"O King, thou art just and mighty,

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and thy countenance is favourable to thy servant. May the King grant again my request! Let this thy servant Arrion and Miriam thy handmaiden go with me to Jerusalem." Arrion and Miriam fell on their knees before the King and bent their faces to the floor.

Artaxerxes again grew flushed and angry, his long hands twitched and trembled.

"Thou art over bold, O Jew," he said. "Arrion is pleasing to me, and as to the maiden, 'tis not my will that she should leave the palace. I have other thoughts for her. For Arrion," he paused and wavered, "what sayest thou Themistocles, thou lovest the lad. Is it well that he should go?"

"It is well," replied Themistocles, gravely, looking down upon the kneeling Arrion, "'tis well for him to return to his country and to his people and not to spend his life in exile."

Artaxerxes seemed to muse a moment.

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"Is this thy will, Themistocles? for I would honour thee."

"Even so, O King! Altho' I love the lad, it is my will that he should go."

"Be it so then, Themistocles," said Artaxerxes, repeating the decree, "Arrion may depart with Nehemiah to Jerusalem, but Miriam abides in the palace."

Hamestris still slept and made no sign. Helplessly Miriam lay at the foot of the King's couch, and no one dared to interfere. One more maiden for the harem. It was a matter of every day. The guests resumed their drinking. The musicians took up their lutes and dulcimers at the order of the King.

"The night is young," said Artaxerxes, "bring more wine, slaves! and fresh garlands. Miriam! I drink to thee," and he lifted her to his side. Arrion's despairing eyes wandered among the counsellors and priests, seeking for a friendly face, some sign which might assist him, and suddenly

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he perceived that Hadar and Ashpenaz, the high priests of Bel's temple, were leaning closely together whispering to each other, and he remembered the words of Themistocles.

"Come, Miriam," said the King in a soft voice; "come, my fair one, lift thy head and look upon the glory of the court. It is all thine, if thou wilt smile and be at peace."

The eyes of the two priests sought each other, and slowly with obsequious steps, bowing low to hide the look in his hawk-like eyes Hadar approached the couch of the King.

"O king! live forever!" spoke the priest in a soft and unctuous voice, "thou art mighty and beloved of thy people, thou rulest more wisely than Xerxes, thou hast the wisdom of Cyrus, and the favour of the gods of Chaldea encircles thy god-like head. Is it thy will that the gods still love thee?"

Artaxerxes smiled and assented. "Thou

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speakest wisdom, Hadar. What sayeth Bel Merodach and Nebo? Have they spoken their will to thee of late?"

"Thou sayest truth, O King! they have spoken."

"And what is their will? I listen, Hadar, thou knowest that I revere the gods of the Babylonians, my people."

"Let not the King be angry! The will of Bel is that this maiden," the priest here raised his voice, looking boldly at the King and uttered these words in a voice of authority and menace; "the will of Bel is that this maiden Miriam shall be priestess of his temple. Niotis is dead and Bel is desolate; 'tis the will of the almighty god, submit thee, he claims his bride."

Artaxerxes paled to a livid whiteness, and he thundered a reply to the defiant priest.

"Begone," he cried, "Blasphemer, thou shalt not have her."

"Let the King beware," answered the

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priest, "let him beware how he dishonors the will of Bel the almighty, let him ask my brethren if I speak not the will of our god."

Artaxerxes turned towards the priests who gave their assent in chorus sullenly with menacing eyes, and then looked towards his soldiers. Angry and drunken the superstition of their blood and race spoke in their heavy faces, in their blood-shot almond eyes:

"'Tis the will of Bel," they answered also.

The King rose, and looked about his court, at the threatening priests and warriors, at the eunuchs slumbering helplessly and at the Ethiopian guard drunken too and prostrate by the golden tables, and he saw that for the moment he must consent.

"Nehemiah," he said, "Arrion! ye are answered. Bel claims the maiden, 'tis the will of the god that she should be priestess of the temple."

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With a low cry Miriam sank fainting on the floor. Arrion leaped to her side.

"But not to-night, O King!" He cried breathlessly, as he knelt beside the unconscious girl. "Not to-night! They may not touch her."

"No! not to-night," said the King, and turning to the priest he cried aloud in impotent despair and rage. "Begone, false priests and traitors! Leave the palace." And he threw himself upon his couch and covered his face with his mantle.

Hamestris still slumbered on among the eunuchs and the drunken Ethiopians. Amytis, sobered again, watched the scene with strange looks of joy and anger, while Themistocles led Arrion slowly from the banqueting hall. The blue smoke of the incense filled the heavy air; on the tables the fading flowers sent forth a cloying fragrance; without, the dawn was breaking.

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It was the day after the feast of Mithras, and the palace seemed asleep. The air of the banqueting room was heavy still with the fumes of incense and the odour of faded flowers. The long corridors were cool and silent, rarely disturbed by the passing of a sleepy eunuch or a soldier with heavy eyes and lagging step. Arrion sat in the khan, or guard hall, with the soldiers. They lounged at ease upon their couches speaking occasionally to each other, gossiping of court and army matters, while a slave served them with snow-cooled wine. Some played at games to while away the long hot hours of the afternoon. The hall was shut as tightly as possible from the hot sun and winds, but the heavy curtain which hung at the