

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

peered like an evil vision from a curtain. The two attendants advanced and drawing their daggers waited for a sign from the infuriated woman. Arrion stood silent and calm. A quick wave of thought veered through the brain of Amytis. Not on Arrion should her vengeance fall, but on the maiden.

"Begone," she cried, "but while the King lives thou shalt not wed her. Away! Leave my presence."

VI

The moon was shining obliquely over the double walls of Babylon, and two great circles of shadow enclosed the city like the Saturnian rings. The interlacing canals gleamed brightly like a silver net flung wide upon the plain, while the river and the surrounding marshes, brilliant as spilled mercury, reflected an indigo sky, pierced with the blazing constellations of the South. The month of Nisan, dedicated to festivals and sacrifices was passing in an ever increasing intoxication of revel and an ever strengthening heat. Now, for a few hours the city slept.

The great mass of the palace was silent, dark also, except where a torch of dripping bitumen sputtered at a gateway, or a moonray glittered on a spear held

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erectly in the motionless hand of a guard. The river, rushing between its painted bastions gave forth a deep and murmuring monotone, distinctly audible in the swooning summer night, and high upon the palace wall the corpse of Inarus, the Egyptian, hung upon its cross. Three days he had hung there, crucified before the courtiers and a concourse of people, by the order of Hamestris, and now at last the warlike head had fallen under its battle helmet and about it, lit strangely by the moonlight, vultures flew, shrieking, contending in a shadowy warfare.

Sleep brooded heavily over the palace. The air of the great, shut-in chambers and halls of feasting was heavy still with the fumes of incense and of the wines and viands which had been served to the guests who feasted daily at the royal table.

The courtyards were strewn with forgotten weapons, fragments of bread and faded garlands, and the tulips and roses were crushed under the feet of the soldiers

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and the thousands of Babylonians who had swarmed within the open palace gates during the days of the festival. But an assemblage of state couches standing in disarray awaited the revels of another day, and the walls were still resplendent with dyed rugs and gold embroidered tapestries.

The festivities of the day had ended by a banquet in the hall of the Melophori, where the King had revelled with his guard of concubines, three hundred women chosen from the many tongued races of his wide empire. Weary at last, with singing and dancing before the King, they had returned to the harem, and the banqueting room was silent. The moonlight which shone upon the helmet of Inarus, here fell with a pale, violet radiance through the narrow windows in the roof, now glimmering in a misty veil, lying torn upon the marble floor, or catching with a passing gleam the gilded hollow of a wine cup, or a silent harp upon an empty couch.

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flower hung from his ears. A long, fringed garment fell in straight folds to his sandalled feet. He stood silent and erect as a hermes, his watchful eyes shining steadily from the shadows. Around the walls of the room ran a dado of carved ivory, gilded and painted with the symbolical figures, half-bird, half-human, of the Babylonian mythology. Inlaid Persian weapons lay upon the floor, among swords and daggers hilted with the double Assyrian lion. Coffers of cedar-wood half open, showed the gleam of jewelled and embroidered garments and jewels glittered like constellations from the lofty ceiling. A crater of incense prepared for the morning purification stood beside a fountain cut deep in basin of black marble. Flowers were floating on the dark surface of the water and, fallen on its rim, a chaplet of myrrh-anointed labysus exhaled a pungent fragrance. A sweet and pervading odour floated in the mild night air.

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Artaxerxes slept heavily, his face paling slowly as the intoxication of the night subsided. He stirred uneasily in his sleep, for he was dreaming.

Evil omens disturbed the mind of the superstitious King, and although the magi and the Babylonian priests prayed continually by his orders to avert his danger, he was not content. The vision of Inarus disturbed him. Sleeping, or waking, he saw him hanging on his cross amid a cloud of bats and vultures, and although he covered his face whenever his chariot rolled beneath the walls, this vision never left his haunted mind. In vain the wine of Helbon, in vain the dances and the songs of his soldiers and his concubines, two thoughts pursued him, Inarus slain, and Miriam, starlike and beautiful, receding, always receding from his grasp. Shame, bitter and acrid, tortured him for his weak yielding to the ferocious Hamestris; desire, persistent and tormenting, for the fair Jewish girl, filled his heart

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with an unwonted hunger. Anxious already over the revolt of Megabysus, his chief general, he feared to alienate the influence of the Babylonian priesthood. Their power was far-reaching, permeating to the very heart of the people. If Miriam were publicly chosen to the honour of bride and priestess of Bel-Merodach, the Persian suzerain might with danger claim her. So the wavering mind of the King swung from hot bursts of anger and desire to weak hesitation and dismay.

Now, as he slept, his tormented brain gave him no rest. The wakeful eyes of his servant watched the King's uneasy slumber, while the blazing lotus glowed and turned above him, swaying in the errant winds which blew from out the night. The silent hours passed rapidly, and the declining moon peered suddenly between the pillars. A broad pale ray fell full upon the face of the King and he awoke. An uncontrollable terror seemed to possess him, his frightened eyes gazed

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wildly about him into the shadows of the room, and he arose and staggered to his feet.

"Hath no one entered, Gyges?" he asked in a shaking whisper. "Hast thou heard no voices?"

The man fell at his feet.

"The King dreameth," he answered, "His Majesty's sleep was troubled. None hath entered."

Artaxerxes struck him in sudden anger, where he knelt.

"Thou liest, slave! they have been here, my brothers. Couldst thou not guard thy King?"

Gyges rose to his feet. He was not unused to these sudden humours of the King. It was his duty to calm his royal master and to distract his fearful thoughts. "Tell me thy dream, O King," he answered calmly, "I may perhaps interpret it."

Artaxerxes drew his garment up to his white face and sank again among the pillows of the couch.

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"Listen then," he said in a trembling voice. "Thou hast seen the vultures as they fly about the corpse of Inarus. I dreamed, O Gyges, that they flew about me as I lay upon my bed. They gathered like clouds around me, massing their wings in a threatening darkness, crowding nearer from the shadows of the chamber. I could see their eyes like points of fire, now here, now there, now gone! But always the wings came closer, stifling me, and the air was nauseous. I tried to beat them back with my hands, but I was weaponless, dumb also, and could not cry aloud. Then the clouds parted with a hissing sound, and what were vultures slowly enlarged to vampires, half-human, half-bird, with spreading wings, and suddenly they leaped upon my bed, there they sat,"—he pointed with a trembling finger,— "one at the head, one at the foot, and their faces! oh, their faces!" he buried his head in his mantle with a muffled cry. "I knew them

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—Darius and Hytaspes—my murdered brothers, risen to threaten, to reproach me! Blood dripped from their dolourous open mouths, blood slow dripping from their lips, dust-smearred, and they spoke, didst thou not hear them, Gyges? Now chirping in the bird-like voices of the dead, now growling as a hyena at his prey, then shrieking,"— the King's voice broke to a helpless, hysterical cry, — "O Gyges, Gyges! protect me!"

"What said they?" asked Gyges kneeling and holding the hands of the affrighted King.

"'Brother,' they cried to me, and 'Brother,' echoing each other, 'we thirst, our food is dust, the water of life flows not for us. Give, give, of the water of life.'"

"Didst thou answer them, O King?"

"I was dumb still. I could not speak, but as they threatened me, crying aloud, bending nearer and ever nearer to me, the darkness of their wings grew blacker

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and thicker about my bed and suddenly the burning light of their four eyes became two, then one, and this light grew and grew, the darkness lightened and I saw," the King's voice sank to an awed whisper, "and I saw a star, a glorious star, beaming brightly in a heaven of blue, and as I gazed the light expanded in a wavering mist which then became the form of a goddess, of the heavenly Ishtar, and the face, O Gyges, 'twas the fair face of Miriam, the Jewish maid. Then I awoke with a light upon my face. What meaneth my dream, slave? Canst thou interpret it? The light, what was it?"

The Lydian arose, and drawing wider the hanging curtains, "'Tis Sin," he said, "the moon-god Sin, the benevolent. See, O King! 'tis he who visits thee with his radiance."

Artaxerxes rose and drawing his garments closely about him, emerged upon the terrace. He stood a moment, trembling still, his tall figure bathed in the quiet

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light which fell upon the sleeping palace, and the palm trees whose feathery tops waved near him in the night breeze. Then with head thrown back beneath the moon-beams, and arms outspread, he spoke.

"O Sin! Moon of fertility, God of peace! look upon thy servant. I am Artaxerxes, King of Kings, King of the land of many tongues, King of the earth wide and near. Bring pardon to me. Turn my dream to happiness. Thou art almighty, thy strong command is proclaimed in heaven, the evil demons flee away and the Igigi prostrate themselves.

"O Hoof of horn, gold-crowned, enlighten me like an image of gold." He turned to the four points of the sky, saluting them gravely. "May the seven winds my groaning carry away, away may my sorrow depart, more rapidly than the rain drops as they fall; yea! more fleetly than the clouds, or the great flight of birds, more swiftly than the arrow as it flies."

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He fell prostrate with his face in the dust, and Gyges as he bent over him heard him murmuring in the fragments of his prayer, despairing words and sighs.

"O Sin! Thou palest in the sky. As a shadow thou vanishest. I am broken as a single reed. Unwise, I can take no counsel. My heart is sorrowful. Let it take rest."

"The King wearieith with his unhappy dream," said Gyges, soothingly. "There is joy throughout the kingdom of his Majesty; the sun and moon are seen apart and the King showeth wisdom. There is loyalty in the land. The cattle at Babylonia pasture in safety, and the Persian armies bear the shield of victory."

"Thinkest thou so, Gyges? Inarus rots upon his cross, and Megabysus revolts in Syria. The ravens fly by me, the sun threatens me, the moon pales, and Ishtar ariseth not, the dream was false, O Gyges, she lingereth in Aralú, in the deep land she tarrieth."

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The slave arose from the side of the prostrate King and scanned the heavens. The night was waning fast and above in the vast vault of the sky the stars went out, like lamps extinguished by the breeze which heralded the morning.

"The King's eyes are blind," exclaimed Gyges, joyfully. "Sin paleth, but even now, Ishtar, his daughter, blazeth in the sky. The dream! the dream is true."

Artaxerxes rose quickly and looked eagerly toward the east, where beaming brightly in the brief moment of her glory, Ishtar, queen of stars, cast a long ray of light as from a beacon far across the wide river and the waving trees.

A look of worship, superstitious and devout, spread over the face of Artaxerxes.

"Thou speakest truth, my Gyges. 'Tis a happy omen. Thus am I answered." He fell again upon his knees, gazing in rapture upon the star. "Ishtar, my goddess, Anahita, thus I worship thee."

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Play now, Gyges; take thy harp and play to her."

The Lydian took his harp and set it upon his hip. It was carved in ebony with a wide sweep like the mighty skeleton of a wing, and as he played striking the strings eagerly with his thin brown hands, his keen, eagle face bent above his instrument, he looked like one of the symbolical figures, half-bird, half-human, painted on the palace walls. The sound was sweeping and monotonous, with an irregular rhythm like the breeze which blew through the palm trees.

Soon the ghost-like moon disappeared, vanishing reluctantly behind the city walls, the star too paled and a yellow light, broad and rising quickly, spread upward from the horizon.

Artaxerxes watched the awakening day with joy. His eyes surveyed the mighty city spread out before his feet. His superstitious fears had vanished with the appearance of the star which seemed to

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him to give a divine permission to his desire.

"Truly am I King," he said with a deep sigh of joy. "Ishtar, the heavenly, smiles upon me and Miriam shall be mine."

Beneath him as he stood upon the high terrace of the palace, he could see clouds of incense arising far and near from the courtyards of the surrounding houses, announcing the morning purifications and ablutions, and directly below him in the sacred enclosure of the palace gardens, a white-robed company of Persian and Babylonian priests attached to the royal household, who were preparing the sacrifices to the rising sun. Early in the morning it was the custom of the Magi to worship the sun after the manner of the Persians. On an artificial mound the altar stood, heaped with myrrh and frankincense and with sandal wood cut fancifully in symbolical forms and ready to be lighted. Near by the Magi, clothed in white, prepared the flesh of the sacri-

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ficial animals, covering the morsels with salt, with myrtle and with laurel leaves. The holy men raised their faces to the King as he stood above them and then bowed in reverence before him. Near the altar, where the Magi worshipped Mithras, the Persian Sun-god, were other altars ministered to by Babylonian priests, where Shamas, the Sun-god of the Chaldeans, was also honoured. Here also white-robed priests raised hands of worship to the King and waited for the rising of their common god.

The light was slowly broadening, rising, soon the blazing glory would pass the shadowy mass of Imgur Bel. The King motioned his harpist to silence and stood, erect and as immobile as an idol, looking eastward to the dawn. The priests below alike stood silent, then suddenly like a torch the first rays shot above the walls and with a cry, the Magi lit the sacrificial fire, and as it blazed, fell before the altar covering their faces, while from the Chal-

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deans came the first accents of their morning hymn.

“O Shamas, O Fire! Hero sublime, son of
the sea,
Son of Ea, who turneth the earth and the sky,
God of Gods, merciful, bland, who bringeth life
to the dead,
Make fertile the plain, cure the plague,
The fever, the pain,
O Shamas, O Hero Fire!”

“God of light, who raiseth thy head on high
and holdeth the tent of the heavens,
Thine is the charm of life, the philtre of joy,
Thy dwelling is space, thy horsemen the winds
of the sky.
To the far fields of light thou sendest the light,
O Shamas, O Hero Fire!”

The sound rose in echoes repeated from the painted palace walls. With a regal and beneficent gesture the King spread out his arms and blessed the city. Then he turned and re-entered the palace.