

## VII

The gnomon at the palace gate marked a diminishing shadow, and the blazing sun of morning, risen half-way in a sky of rayless turquoise, flooded courts and gardens with an intolerable, white light.

The hall of audience was filled with a waiting concourse of people. Heavy curtains hanging before the pillared doorway excluded the burning light and heat, and the rare sunrays which found their way through the narrow windows, glowed with an incandescent light, like molten metal. They fell upon a swarming crowd of attendants and soldiers gathered together in the lower end of the hall. Stool-bearers, grooms, umbrella and fan carriers, bakers and perfumers chatted with artisans of various kinds, while an assem-

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blage of Persian and Babylonian soldiers lounged against the painted pillars and gossipped idly with each other. Here were a number of short-robed Kavassis, with their broad-bladed hangars, and there a group of Immortals, dressed in long, embroidered robes, tinkling with jewels, and fragrant with oils and perfumes. In the upper end of the chamber the seven councillors of the King, called his eyes and ears, sat in their high, ivory-footed chairs, holding the wands of office in their hands. Themistocles, the Greek, present according to his custom, at the morning audience of the King, loitered beside them in familiar converse, and near the curtain which divided the outer hall of audience from the inner throne room, stood Arrion, clad in the scarlet dress of the cupbearer, ready to announce the appearance of the King and to introduce supplicants and favoured visitors to his Majesty.

Near by, Hamestris sat under the

waving fans of her attendants. Her old face was veiled, but she stirred impatiently in her seat and whispered frequently to Amytis, who stood by her mother's side, veiled also, and holding by the hand a bright-eyed child, Zopyrus, her young son.

Arrion noted their presence with surprise and his thoughts were busy with conjecture as to their unusual visit to the throne room of the King. "His Majesty is late," he whispered to Themistocles, who approached at a beckoning glance.

It was indeed an hour past the time when it was the custom of the King to listen to the petitions of his supplicants and to commence the business of the Court.

"Dice-playing, feasting and drunkenness," answered the Greek in a whisper, "is the business of the Persian court. It is not strange that the King's soldiers and councillors must wait. But why are the women present at his audience?"

"Why, indeed?" answered Arrion with concern. "They defy all custom. Hamestris plots some new cruelty, perchance." "'Tis strange," returned Themistocles, with an amused glance of curiosity, "but they are resourceful, these women, and fertile in invention as they are intemperate. As thou sayest, Arrion, 'tis not the King who rules."

An intermittent murmur of impatience spread from group to group among the waiting people in the hall, and as Themistocles and Arrion whispered together a silver horn note, three times repeated, resounded from behind the curtain, and Arrion swept the draperies aside and disclosed the King upon his throne.

A hush fell upon the waiting people, then there was a murmur and the rustle of garments as they prostrated themselves at the appearance of the King.

Although it was day without in burning Babylon, hanging lamps illumined the obscurity in which the Persian monarch

sat, remote, secluded as in a shrine. Six steps guarded by golden dogs, led up to the golden throne on which he sat in a hieratic pose, immobile as a statue, the royal tiara blazing on his head. His hair and beard were curled with the stiff rigidity of carved marble and as he smiled upon his people from the mysterious mist of incense which enveloped him, the imperial face with its sculptured beauty, was as calm and as inscrutable as an idol's.

Arrion advanced amid the silence and kneeling upon the lower steps of the throne, waited the raising of the royal sceptre.

"Greeting to thee, Arrion," said the King, "and benediction. Greeting to ye, my people."

Arrion rose to his feet, looking anxiously upon the face of the King. No frown darkened the imperial brow, his smile was unusually benign and gracious, the splendid eyes were radiant as with some unspoken joy.

"May the King live forever," Arrion answered. "His servant reads joy in the face of his Majesty."

"Thou speakest truth, Arrion," answered the King, "my dreams have turned favourably, Ishtar, the goddess, visited my slumbers. The omens are happy and my heart rejoiceth."

"May the favour of heaven abide with the King," answered the young Jew, "and may that favour be spread abroad upon his empire and his subjects. Many await the word of his Majesty. Is it his pleasure to listen to his supplicants?"

The King's glance fell first upon Amytis.

"Let my sister speak. What is thy will, Amytis?"

Amytis was grave and pale and held the young Zopyrus closely by the hand, as she approached her royal brother. Arrion regarded her with wonder and with concern. What prayer would she make to the King? Would it mean evil

to himself or Miriam? She did not look at him as she swept by him, but mounting one of the steps beside the throne, with the boy before her, she turned an earnest face towards her brother.

"Artaxerxes," she said "thou seest Zopyrus?"

"Even so, my sister."

"And thine eyes may see how like he is to that hero, who first gave this kingdom to the great Darius, Zopyrus, father of my husband, Megabysus?"

Artaxerxes bent and raised the child so that he stood against his knees.

"Tis truth thou speakest, sister. But why dost thou bring the child to me? He is well, I see, and aileth not."

"No, he is as strong as a young lion, as befits his race, but I may lose him." She caught the child to her breast with a fierce gesture. "This day his father sends a messenger to fetch him."

"Sends?" Artaxerxes asked with a sudden flash of anger, "how sends?"

"Thou knowest, brother, that he journeyeth to Syria, dishonoured he hath left the court, in deep anger with thee, Artaxerxes, in deep displeasure with his wife, Amytis. The messenger who came to me," she continued, looking into the frowning face of the King, "brought evil tidings. He gathereth a mighty army, thou knowest he is strong in Syria. Scythia likewise revolts, and Bactria," — she paused, looking meaningly at her brother, whose lips involuntarily repeated, "Bactria."

"Even so, and the wind which blew in the face of Hytaspes and his army may not turn so favourably as on the day when our brother fell before thee. The wind varieth, as doth the favour of the gods. Let the King beware."

Artaxerxes turned upon the queen-mother in a burst of fear and anger. "Tis thy cruelty, Hamestris," he cried, "thy vengeance, which brings this danger upon us."

"Fearful as always, Artaxerxes," an-

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swered Hamestris, unabashed before the anger of her son. "Hast thou no armies? Are there no soldiers in Persia, in Babylon, in Assyria?"

"Soldiers, yes! but no generals, none like Megabysus."

"Must thy women help thee, then?" she answered contemptuously. "Send Amytis to her husband and if it please thee I will go also with the child, Zopyrus, but if so, delay not, thou knowest the summer heats begin, the journey is long and I am old."

"What matters it, it is thy work. Inarus rots upon his cross and bringeth evil upon the empire. Go and go quickly, whatever it costs us, Megabysus must return. Amytis, wilt thou go?"

The Princess was silent, holding the child with a fierce tenderness to her breast, but her eyes had wandered to Arrion as he stood in his young beauty by the steps of the throne and the glance which she cast upon him above the curling head of

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her child was strange and threatening. Would she go, could she forfeit her revenge upon the youth who had resisted and despised her? Arrion dared not look upon the quivering passionate face. He held his breath during the long moment in which she stood, silent and hesitating before the King.

"For my child's sake, brother," she said at last. "Yes, I will go," her eyes met Arrion's, "but at my pleasure."

"'Tis well," answered the King quickly, "so that thou appease his anger. Thou shalt have a guard, gold, whatever is needful for thy journey, and whatever Megabysus asks of thee, see that thou promise it. And now," he paused with a clearing brow, "let Themistocles approach. I would take counsel with him."

The Greek advanced with a smile at the unusual favour and bowed before the King. He was dressed as was his custom in the Persian robes of the King's sons-in-law

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and carried a staff tipped with a golden apple in his hand.

"What news hast thou of thy cities in Macedonia, Themistocles?" asked the King. "Is it well with the people of Magnesia and Lampsacus? they are loyal and prosperous?"

"Loyal, your Majesty, but not prosperous. It was my purpose to announce to thee the tidings which this day have come to me."

"They are evil?" asked Artaxerxes, anxiously, "Is there peace in no province of my empire?"

"The plague visits the Ionian coast, O King, and spreads widely among the provinces. The people are panic-stricken, and flee helpless from their homes. The wells are poisoned, the grain ungathered."

"Is there no help?"

"If it be the pleasure of the King to listen to a stranger in his court."

"Speak, Themistocles."

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"Artaxerxes is ever mindful of the welfare of his people," answered Themistocles, with a shrewd look, as he bowed low before the royal throne; "there dwells in Cos, a mighty physician, Hippocrates, famed through all the cities of Greece and of Asia Minor and through all the islands, for his skill. If it be the will of the King, I will send a messenger to him commanding him in the name of thy Majesty to visit thy afflicted people, so may the name of the King be exalted and the wisdom of Themistocles be brought to the remembrance of the Greeks."

"It shall be done, Themistocles," replied the King. "Let no one say that Longimanus forgets the sorrows of his people. What say ye, Oropastes?" he looked toward the seven councillors as they sat together. "What say ye, Antacharsis, Barachiel?"

"Wise always is the great King," they answered, raising their wands of office, "great is Artaxerxes."

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A satisfied smile spread once more over the King's face and a murmur of applause repeated from group to group arose from the throng of soldiers and servants in the audience chamber. But suddenly the murmur and the hum of voices ceased, the curtain which hung before the doorway was pushed aside and a dark figure clad in sable garments appeared, sharply outlined in the blaze of sunlight which poured into the hall.

"Who is this who approaches?" exclaimed the King.

There was no answer, but all eyes were turned upon the visitor, who advanced fearlessly through the long line of courtiers and attendants, who drew back to let her pass, until she stood at the foot of the throne. Then with a sudden gesture, she unveiled.

It was a woman bowed and old, with a white woe-stricken face, from which fierce black eyes looked forth with an expression of implacable hatred.

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"Mandona," cried Hamestris in amazement, "sister, what brings thee hither?"

The long hands of Artaxerxes trembled on his sceptre as he leaned forward, speechless with amazement.

Themistocles and Arrion standing together looked with wonder at this strange woman, who in the black garments of her woe, thus unheralded appeared before them.

"I come," she answered in a trembling low whisper, "I come at their bidding."

"At whose bidding?" asked the King, finding his voice.

"From Ecbatana, from my palace have I journeyed. They drove me hither."

"Who?" asked Artaxerxes again.

"Who, sister?" asked Hamestris approaching her, "speak, we hear thee."

"The spirits of my sons," her voice rose suddenly to a shriek, "their bones lie unburied on the rocks of Salamis, unburied, cursed, and their murderer, the Greek," she turned pointing to The-