

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

mistocles, "thou hast given him refuge. Shame to thee, son of Xerxes. Shame!"

Artaxerxes shrank back, terror-stricken, murmuring, as the hallucination of his haunted night swept over him. "Again, again, the spirits of the dead, they have risen to torment me."

"What is thy will, sister?" asked Hamestris, turning her back upon the shuddering King, "Speak."

Mandona's shaking finger still pointed towards Themistocles.

"His death," she cried in a shrill voice of fury, "his death, in vengeance for my murdered sons."

Hamestris grasped the hand of Mandona, and advanced nearer to the throne. A dull flame burned in the narrow eyes of the old queen.

"Thou hearest, Artaxerxes," she cried threateningly, "the life of Themistocles she asketh, the dead, they speak through her."

Artaxerxes gazed upon the two old

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women, at their wrinkled faces distorted with hate and malice, and suddenly he rose to his feet, himself once more, erect and angrily defiant.

"Is it not enough, Hamestris, that the blood of murdered children is given thee for thy vengeance, that Inarus, our guest and hostage, is slain to pleasure thee? My general Megabysus revolts against me, my empire totters at thy bidding, but the life of Themistocles is sacred. It shall not be given to thee."

"Then upon thy head," cried Mandona again, "impious son of Xerxes, be the blood of my sons. I curse thee in their name."

"Peace, peace, madwoman," answered the King, "thy sons shall be avenged." He turned to Themistocles.

"Hear me," he said, "my honoured friend and councillor and obey the command I lay upon thee."

Themistocles approached and knelt before the King.

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"I have no commander like to thee, Themistocles. It is my will that thou shouldst lead my armies into Greece, avenge for me the revolt in Egypt and the bitter shame of Salamis, so will my word prevail and thus, Mandona, will I gloriously avenge thy sons."

Mandona dropped her threatening arm and Hamestris too fell silent, as they gazed upon the kneeling figure of the aged Greek. Themistocles turned a face grown white and rigid to the King.

"I hear," he answered, in a low voice, "and I obey thee, O Artaxerxes. My life is thine, only if it please thee grant one prayer."

"'Tis granted ere thou speakest," answered the King.

"Give me seven days in which to answer thee," he hesitated a moment, turning his eyes to the implacable faces of Hamestris and Mandona who stood together watching him, then he rose, regaining his composure. "Seven days,"

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he repeated, "O Artaxerxes, to consult with the generals and councillors. Then will I lay before his Majesty my answer and the plan of the invasion."

"Be it so," the King replied, "thou hast my permission to retire to thy villa at Borsippa. There shall my councillors assemble and may the wisdom of the gods be with thee."

"And now Hamestris, conduct Mandona to the harem. Thou also, Amytis, return to thy apartments. I would be alone."

He reversed his sceptre in sign that the audience was finished.

Themistocles withdrew in silence and Arrion at the signal of the King drew the curtains once more as the women and councillors left the throne room. Hope rose high in the heart of the young Jew. Surely Themistocles might ask anything of the King if indeed he would consent to lead his armies into Greece. Amytis was commanded to depart to Syria; the ca-

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precious Princess might forego her vengeance; Miriam might still be saved.

"Miriam, Miriam," the name of his girl love mounted to his lips like a song. He turned a happy face towards the King, who leaned back upon the cushions of the throne with smiling lips and eyes as happy as his own.

"And now, Arrion, well beloved, bring me Miriam. Ishtar, the goddess smiles, heaven itself consents, the maiden shall be mine."

The smile froze upon the face of Arrion and for a perilous moment he stood motionless, his thoughts a-whirl. Dare he defy the King? Fall at his feet and declare his own love for Miriam? Artaxerxes' voice again pierced through the mist which seemed to blind him.

"Go, Arrion, delay not. I am weary with these women. Command that Miriam be brought to me. I await her."

Mechanically Arrion turned and left the presence of the King. At the doorway of

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the now empty hall of audience two eunuchs stood, nodding sleepily in the heavy heat of noon.

Arrion gave the command that the King's message be sent to the harem and returning through the echoing room, took his place once more by the curtain which fell before the door of the throne room.

A feeling of helpless rage overwhelmed him like a flood. What power had he, a servant in the King's court, to save her? What was she? A victim of Artaxerxes—slave like himself to his caprices. One thought upheld him. He would be there to receive her and protect her. It was very still in the empty hall. The murmur of the city came faintly through the half-drawn curtains, and there was a buzz of flies in the sunrays which crept along the marble floor.

His eyes dwelt half-unconsciously upon them as they wavered on the pattern of the mosaic. Now a blue square, now a red, blazed into light under the invading

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sunbeams. What could he do? What word of courage could he find to help her?

No sound came from behind the curtains. The moments slowly passed. How patiently the King waited! Suddenly there was a sound of footsteps falling lightly, and again the blaze of sunlight from the parted curtains. The eunuchs stood aside and a slight figure, veiled and graceful, passed within the hall. It was she, Miriam! Arrion sped to her side. One moment, one only, in which to whisper to the lovely face behind the veil, one kiss upon her hand, one word of courage in her ear,—he lifted the curtain and Miriam passed into the presence of the King. It was no monarch who awaited the trembling girl. Artaxerxes had descended from the throne and stood with outstretched hands, like a lover to receive her. Miriam lingered by the curtain, the thought of Arrion's near presence sustaining her.

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"Approach," said the King's voice. "Fear not."

Arrion could hear the little click of the chainlet which bound her ankles as her steps receded from the curtain, then silence followed by a murmur indistinguishable to his ears.

Within, far removed from the light of day, the lamps blazed and swung slowly among the mounting wreaths of incense, and Artaxerxes, superb in his kingly beauty, smiled upon the girl.

"Unveil," he said, laying his hand on Miriam's shoulder, "I would see thy face."

Slowly she unveiled; the wonderful eyes blossoming like black lilies in the whiteness of her face, gazed upon the King with a fluttering fear, and slowly she sank to her knees before him.

A sensation of unreality possessed the girl. This could not be she, herself, Miriam, this was not the King's face which bent above her with flushed cheeks and ardent eyes. The lamps shone dimly

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above her in the blue smoke of incense, the sunshine and the daylight seemed afar. She sank, half-charmed, half-frightened, into the magic of the dream.

"Rise, Miriam," the gracious, commanding voice spoke softly above her bending head. "Tell me, art thou a mortal maiden? Whence comest thou? My people call thee Ishtar."

Miriam still knelt.

"I am the humblest of thy servants," she answered in a low voice.

Artaxerxes raised her gently towards him.

"How beautiful art thou, Miriam, how beautiful!"

The girl lifted her eyes to the King, mastering her fear.

"What is the will of the King?" she asked.

"How sweet thy voice," he answered, "it is music in mine ears. Well art thou called goddess. Rise, Ishtar, and look upon the King, thy subject."

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"Thy words are wonderful, O Artaxerxes," she replied. "I know not their meaning. I am Miriam, a Jewish maid and servant in thy court."

Artaxerxes heard her not. His eyes dwelt upon the beauty of the girl who with returning courage, looked tranquilly upon him.

The whiteness of her garments fell about her in the dim silence of the secluded room, like a moon-mist, mysterious, sacred to herself. The jewels lay upon her breast, which fell and rose with her quick breath. His eyes dwelt upon its whiteness, straying downward to the linked girdle which bound her slender body to the little sandalled feet. Something inexpressibly pure and unapproachable seemed to emanate from her. Her tranquil eyes, grave as a child's, surveyed him with an unconquerable pride and innocence. Was she real, this girl, or was she indeed the goddess visiting again his dreams? The vision of the night swept

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once more over the superstitious mind of the King; he took an unconscious backward step, a look of wonder and worship widening in his eyes.

"Ishtar," he murmured "thou art come again. Incline thine ear, O daughter of the Moon, and listen to my prayer. Tell me of Aralû, the deep land whence thou comest. Hast thou plucked the flowers which grow by Datilla's stream? The water of life, hast thou tasted of it? In my dreams last night," he continued with a look of boundless adoration, "I was surrounded by thick darkness, the spirits of the dead visited me, they cried upon me, threatening and terrible, and I was sore afraid. Then in the darkness a star arose, a light, which became a woman, and as I gazed I saw that it was Ishtar, and her face," he fell at the feet of the wondering girl, "it was thine, O goddess, and it smiled upon me."

"The King dreameth still," answered Miriam withdrawing herself, but his hands

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still clasped her, his eyes flashed again with an eager light.

"Smile once more, O star of my delight! Fear nothing. Leave me not, I love thee."

Again the sensation of unreality dimmed the senses of the girl, while she looked in wonder upon the King as he knelt at her feet. Clouds seemed to float about her, her ears were filled with the sound of rushing waters. She closed her eyes.

The King's arms enclosed her, his voice came to her as in a dream, commanding, supplicating.

"O Miriam, I see thee always, asleep or waking. By day thy tranquil eyes are with me, they subdue me with their pride. But by night they smile upon me. Oh, smile again, do with me as thou wilt. Thou art my star, my fortune, leave me not." His words poured eagerly from his lips. "Come to me, Miriam. If thou wilt thou shalt be queen, or if thou wilt together we will

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leave the court. I know an island where the Nile flows into a wide sea of blue, Kyranis, it is called; it lieth leagues away, but we will journey thither; olives and vines grow near the water's edge; the fragrance of its flowers floats as an incense in the air; in the depths of its pools gold lies ungathered and the breeze is a perfume soft as thy breath, dreamy like wine. Oh, come, Miriam, come. There I shall find youth again with thee." His words broke into an inarticulate murmur, mingled with sighs, with caresses.

The girl swayed under his words as a lily bending in a storm. This then was Artaxerxes, this supplicant, ardent and timid as a child, who knelt before her. The King, whose lightest word was life or death!

"It is truth, thou speakest, O my King!" she said at last with hesitating breath. "Thou lovest me?"

"I would have love for love," he murmured, drawing her down.

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No yielding now, no weakness. She drew herself to her full height.

"Thou hast a thousand slaves, your Majesty, of which I am the weakest."

The King rose to his feet and pointed to the throne.

"'Tis thine," he answered joyously, "free maiden of my people."

"The King grants freedom to his servant," she replied, "then let him be generous as he is mighty. Let me go. I love thee—not."

Her eyes gazed with unconquerable courage into the ardent eyes of the King, and in the silence their gaze crossed like a clash of swords. Then with an inarticulate cry he strode towards her.

"Thou art mine," he cried, and clasped her shrinking in his arms. "Think not that I will let thee go."

At this moment a crash of cymbals resounded suddenly through the echoing emptiness of the hall without and a cry, sonorous as the smitten bronze, pene-

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trated with a sudden clangour into the silence of the room.

"The priests of Bel! Make way for the priests of Bel!" Arrion's pale face appeared at the curtain, and with a cry, released, Miriam fled to his side.

VIII

Miriam gazed with dilating eyes through the parted curtain, as one who awakes suddenly from a dream. In the distant doorway a cortége approached with slow and measured steps. Down the long hall of audience it came, a band of priests, of eunuchs, and of temple servants, advancing with a waving of wands, a seagreen gleam of peacock fans, a flash of pink flamingos, in a whirl of changing colour and a deafening clash of bronze. At the head two priests marched together, carrying aloft a shimmering gold-flecked veil. The direct rays of the noon-day sun were falling now through the narrow windows in the roof in a filtered rain of gold, and as the priest advanced through the alternate light and shadow which barred the