

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

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



marble floor, the veil blazed in sparkling brilliancy and faded again to a mysterious pearly mist.

Arrion grasped tight the hand of Miriam. "The veil of Niotis, the high priestess," he whispered.

"Why do they bring it?" she asked him wondering.

"Thy summons to the temple," was his answer, but it was drowned in the clash of cymbals for the cortege was close upon them. They could see the bearded faces of the priests, painted strangely with mystic, sacerdotal symbols and half concealed under the veils which flowed from under their scarlet cone-shaped caps. Over their shoulders hung the sacred fawn-skin and their flounced garments trailed behind them on the marble floor. Beside them walked the eunuchs clad in swaying long-fringed robes, and bearing aloft the cymbals of Bel-Merodach. They advanced slowly, pausing between each step to smite the ringing cymbals, and as

they smote them they cried aloud. "Make way for the priests of the temple. Make way for the messengers of Bel."

Their cries, mingling with the clash of bronze, rose in increasing waves of sound, imperious and overwhelming. At the foot of the throne they paused before the frowning king. The deafening clamour subsided in a diminishing echo and one of the priests approached and raised his sacred rod. He made no obeisance before the throne of Artaxerxes, the messenger and priest of Bel advanced as a master whose word should be obeyed by king and subject. Miriam looking upon him, recognized with a thrill of fear the eyes which had gazed upon her at the feast of Mithras. The other priest was old and corpulent, his flat-nosed face, of the ordinary Babylonian type, was weak and heavy, and as he stood aside holding the sacred veil, his sunken almond eyes peered out upon her with a dull leer of



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curiosity. But he who advanced with lifted rod had a face not easily forgotten. In the high brow and long thin features, she saw the ancient type of the learned Akkadian race; the deep-set eyes were those of a thinker, but the lips beneath the flowing, uncurled beard, were revolting in their wolfish cruelty. This was Hadar, the high priest of Bel and chief judge of the temple court of law, and his name was one of terror and unquestioned power among the superstitious, priest-ridden Babylonians. His keen eyes surveyed with half-concealed contempt the face of Artaxerxes, which was flushed still, and shaken with passion, and as they fell upon Miriam standing silently by Arrion's side, they flashed with a sinister gleam of joy.

"O King! live forever," he said in a harsh voice of authority, "I bring the command of Bel-Merodach, the mighty. The Lord of E-Sagila speaks."

Speechless with anger at the intrusion

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of the priests, Artaxerxes raised his sceptre in sign that he would hear him, but his face was dark and angry.

"Already, Artaxerxes," the priest continued with scant courtesy, "thou hast heard the command of Bel. Already hath he claimed his bride." With a threatening gesture he raised his rod and pointed to Miriam where she stood. "Yet still the maiden tarrieth in the palace. Beware, unheeding son of Xerxes, how thou incurrest the anger of our God."

Still the King spoke not but under his half-closed lids, his wavering glance turned first upon the threatening priest, and then upon the face of Miriam.

"Beware," cried Hadar again insultingly, "O Persian! how thou defiest the high God of Heaven. His anger waxeth fierce against thee. Portents gather in the clouds. On the fifteenth day, a day of danger and disaster, Shamas and Sin were seen together. The moon darkened the face of the sun and in fear the stars



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fell from the sky. Still thou heedest not. And now,"—he advanced to the steps of the throne and shook the sacred rod full in the face of the King, "now, O impious one, thy generals revolt and armies rise against thee. In the fields thy cattle perish, dogs enter into the Du-aggara, into the holy place of the temple, and locusts of evil omen gather in clouds about the images of the gods. Be warned! The time is full."

Slowly, as he listened, the flush faded from the face of the King, and his wavering glance grew cold and stern. He arose and faced the priests, imperial again in majesty, calm and inscrutable.

"Silence, priest," he answered with contemptuous scorn. "Beware how thou defiest thy King. Think ye a band of flounced and painted priests can frighten Artaxerxes, King of Kings, and Lord of all the earth? Think ye my empire totters because one general raises his hand against me? At my own pleasure will I give the

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maiden up to thee. When it pleaseth me I will obey thy God."

Then he turned to Miriam with a strange, slow smile.

"Maiden," he said, "wilt thou go with them? Choose, girl! Shall it be priests or King?"

"Miriam raised her eyes to the King's throne and with a proud gesture lifted her arms in supplication.

"Thou gavest me my freedom, O my King," she answered. "I claim it. Let me go."

The King paused an instant to reply, and once more his eyes met Miriam's, shining clear and steadily upon him. Then, as she faltered not, his own eyes changed, flickering suddenly in a rising tide of anger and resentment.

"Thou refusest my protection? Speak then, thyself. Answer the priests, and may thy God protect thee."

Miriam moved slowly forward until she stood by the foot of the throne, then clasp-



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ing her hands above her breast, she faced the King and the priests. Under her wide arched brows her eyes looked out with an expression of mystic rapture, fearless and inspired.

"O King!" she answered, "I am but a girl, and yet thou bidst me speak. I hear the command which bids me minister to Bel at E-Sagila." She looked bravely into the face of Hadar. "Thou knowest, O Priest, that there is no such god. Bel-Merodach is but an idol, senseless and impotent. There is one God, one, whose dwelling is not E-Sagila, nor any house made by the hands of man. He is a spirit, fashioned not of gold nor ivory. So our fathers worshipped Him—our fathers—thine, yea, thine also, the great ones of our common race. In Ur they heard his voice; in Eridu, in Lagash, there they worshipped Him. But their pure worship languisheth and the sacred cities crumble in the plain, while ye, false priests, have set up idols in His place.

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✕ What need have ye of images? The power of God speaketh in the rolling sky. ✕ In dark Shualu He dwelleth. The floods obey Him and the rivers flow from out His hands. On the morning's wings He walketh, the sun and fire are His messengers. In E-Kur, the mountain-house ye worship, knowing that all the mountains are His footstools. The little hills, are His and the valleys sink under His mighty treading. One He is and almighty, but ye have stretched out your hands to strange gods, and blasphemed His name with many names. Bel-Merodach, the cruel,—Nergal, the bloody,—Nusku, the fire god, the insatiable——"

"Cease, cease, impious girl," cried Hadar furiously, "in the name of the gods whom thou blasphemeth, I curse thee. May Bel the mighty blast thee. May the arrows of Nergal slay thee. May Nusku burn thee."

"Let them strike me as I stand," she replied, her answer coming with instant



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courage from her youthful lips. "Jehovah is my God."

Arrion caught his breath in terror as he gazed upon her, standing there alone and unaffrighted before the threatening priests.

The King's jewelled hand was over his lips, and his eyes, bright with an eager light, were fixed upon the girl. Was it desire unappeased, or admiration for this unknown courage which could reject a King, defy the priests of Babylon? +

There was a moment's silence.

"Ye hear," she said at last, smiling and unafraid, "I am unharmed, unsmitten. Your gods are impotent. Eyes have they, but they see not; mouths, but they are dumb; hands, but they strike not. As a child the images of Bel and Ishtar were my playthings; in the market-place the image makers sell your gods for a copper coin. Ah, your great gods! They are false; they cannot harm me."

Hadar looked long at the girl as she

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faced them, star-eyed and smiling, and a strange, devouring look of wonder and admiration gleamed in his deep-set eyes.

Between them, King and priest, the girl stood helpless yet victorious. Arrion had a mad impulse to fling himself at her feet. Pride and love rose high above his fear. He looked hopefully toward the King, and gazing caught a long look of furtive comprehension passing between Hadar and the monarch. Then the priest approached the throne of the King, who bent and whispered in his ear. Arrion stepped noiselessly to Miriam's side.

"Artaxerxes will give thee to the priests," he said in an eager, hurried whisper, "but it is seven days before the temple rites, whether it be King or priests, thou remainest in the palace. Watch thy opportunity and when the eunuchs sleep steal from the harem; come to the hanging gardens at the seventh terrace by the fountain; thou knowest, Miriam? At the