

## IX

It was the hour before sunrise and the palms and tamarisks of the hanging garden seemed asleep. No breeze stirred in their deep green shadows, while upon the topmost terrace their fantastic foliage swept a splendid arabesque high against the sky. Beneath, the gardens hung, as if in air, a wonder of interlacing green, filled with the silver sound of falling fountains, drowned in night. Towards the west the arches of the terraces descended in a sheer fall, 250 feet to the reservoir of Nebuchadnezzar, called as in the time of the great King, Napur Shapu, or "great basin."

Towards the east the gardens rose in stages of decreasing size, according to the habitual designs of the Babylonian builders, until the topmost stage of all,

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which was so high in air, that it caught every wandering breeze from the desert, and with its running streams, its tropical shade of mingled tree and flower, was a refuge from the burning heat of the plain.

Under each terrace were supporting columns of stone and hollow masonry, containing the roots of the larger trees and entwined with a concealing mass of flowering vines. Staircases of alabaster from the mountains of Zagros, fantastically carved and painted in crude colours, mounted diagonally from terrace to terrace, and gilded statues of the gods stood in long procession at the edge of the overhanging forest looking down upon Babylon and her flowing streams.

Water was lifted to the highest terrace by thousands of slaves who with an elaborate hydraulic system kept the Queen's gardens freshly green even in the dry heat of summer, when the desert was a drift of sand storms and Babylon a furnace.

Far within, in the deepest seclusion of



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the tropical thicket, the famed fountain of golden water tinkled in its silver basin. This precious water was brought from the far Choaspes, and was sacred to the King. At its head stood a statue of Dagon, the fish-god, his golden scales gleaming faintly in the diffused emerald shadow of the palm-trees. Here in this remote and silent spot sat Arrion, solitary and alone. Night after night he had stolen from his couch in the palace, passing the guards at the gate with the King's countersign, and night after night had mounted the alabaster steps and found his way to the fountain. It was guarded by a Lybian slave, for none but the King might drink of it on pain of death; but Arrion, known to the palace guards as the favourite of Artaxerxes, was left unmolested. So he watched alone by the tinkling water, and the guard, withdrawing farther into the forest, slumbered deeply, while Arrion waited for Miriam's coming. Three nights had passed and still she came not, and his

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anxiety and fear became a torment, his sleepless eyes were heavy, and his mind oppressed. The long suspense was an unspeakable torture to his impatient youth. Wilfully still he sat beside the fountain, while his mind strove to form plans for her deliverance. He reviewed in thought the years of his life at Babylon, the voluptuous court, the degraded priesthood, and a longing for that country he had never seen, the lost paradise of his people, grew in his heart.

With shame he acknowledged to himself his growing pleasure in the luxuries and flatteries of the court. He remembered now with wonder the weeks when he had wilfully banished the thought of Miriam, and a painful blush burned his cheek even in the darkness when he thought of the moment when he had so nearly yielded to Amytis. The fear of her vengeance was now added to his horror of the priests, his certainty of the King's perilous preference for Miriam.



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Gladly, he thought, he would resign it all,—the fancy of the Princess, even the envied favour of the King. What was it worth? The victorious Megabysus was dishonoured. Miriam was given over to the priests. What could he do? His thoughts turned hopefully towards Themistocles. He had been unable to see his master since the feast at the palace, but had received an invitation for a banquet at the house of the Greek, which was to take place on the day following. Then, surely, he thought he would have speech with him. Arrion knew how hardly Themistocles would obey the King's command to lead the Persian armies into Greece, and he knew if he should consent he could ask much of Artaxerxes, perhaps even the deliverance of Miriam. He thought of Nehemiah also, busily engaged in preparations for his journey across the desert. The summer with its blasting heats was coming on apace. He must hasten indeed if he were to be ready to

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leave Babylon with Nehemiah. Four days remained before the ceremonies of the initiation, when Miriam would be invested with the robes of Niotis, and be forced to sacrifice to Bel. There was indeed no moment to be lost. Arrion turned these sad and desperate thoughts over and over in his mind with an anguish of determination and resolve, wholly new to his happy boyhood, and anxiety waxed to despair and despair turned again to hope, as the shadows of the forest began to lighten towards the dawn.

Suddenly his ear caught a low call, which he thought at first was the note of a bird, stirring from its sleep among the branches, and then he heard a footstep, as light as a falling leaf, and a slight figure, wrapped in a dark mantle, emerged from the shadows and Miriam stood before him. Slowly she drew the veil from her face. Her white draperies enveloped her mysteriously as in a mantle of moonlight. Her beautiful, tranquil



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eyes looked out upon him from the shadows. In the dim cloister of this remote spot, against the darkness of the starlit trees, her young beauty seemed a thing too pure for mortal touch. Motionless, in her white garments, she seemed as high and unapproachable as a goddess in a shrine.

Arrion fell at her feet, overwhelmed with love and shame, and with unspeakable reverence and worship, kissed her little sandals, murmuring her name. Miriam leaned above him, no goddess, but a woman, shy and tender. ✧

✧ "Why shouldst thou kneel to me, Arrion, my lord, my master? 'Tis I should kneel to thee. Come near, I cannot see thy face. Speak. I am hungry for the words of thy mouth." ✧

He rose upon his knees encircling her tenderly with both his arms, and looking up with adoration to the beauty of her face.

"Miriam, Miriam, do I see thee,

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touch thee?" He hid his face in her dress. "Ah! they would take thee from me."

He could feel the touch of her hands upon his hair. Ishtar, she might be to the Babylonians, Kings might desire her; ✧ to him she was Miriam again, his childhood's love, and she was trembling. ✧ He rose, and with a long sigh, as one who thirsts, he clasped her, and the two young lovers, reunited gazed long in speechless joy upon each other.

"Ah, Arrion," she sighed at last, "I have so longed for thee."

"Forgive me! Pity me! I am unworthy of thee, as the dust—as the mire at thy feet."

"Thou unworthy?" She looked at him wonderingly.

"To think, to think that I was ignorant of thy coming to the palace. Who saw thee, Miriam? Thou art ever guarded by thy mother. Thou goest not unveiled?"



"No, Arrion, but it is now two moons since I was walking with my mother and with Tirzah, near the temple of Ishtar in the early morning, when a sudden wind blew the veil from my face. At that moment we were before the very gates. They opened and a company of priests came forth. They stopped before me with strange looks of wonder, and as we hastened from the place they followed me, calling aloud, 'Ishtar, the goddess! Behold her! 'Tis Astarte! 'Tis Ishtar!' I know not what their meaning was, but ever after when I walked abroad, I heard the people murmuring behind me." She stopped, hesitating,—“And then I was summoned to the palace.”

Arrion took her face gently between his palms.

“This fair face,” he said, “this wonderful, fair face,—it is thy danger, Miriam.”

“Why should I be brought to the palace, Arrion?” she asked in distress.

“'Tis a marvel to me, and the King”—her voice sank to a whisper, “thou knowest, Arrion, that Artaxerxes would exalt me to be his Queen. I, his Queen! Why should I be chosen for these honours? I ask only to dwell with thee among our people.”

“I know, Miriam. I know thy heart.”

“I fear them, Arrion,” she continued, shuddering, “Hamestris,—that cruel woman,—and Amytis,—and O Arrion! the feast! those drunken soldiers! the priests! the King!”—she hid her face in her hands.

“I have waited for thee, Miriam,” he answered hurriedly. “Four days only remain before the temple rites. The time is short, there is no moment to be lost.”

“I know, Arrion, I know. I have not slept, but watched how I might escape. The guards were wakeful, the eunuchs slumbered not. But to-night the Princess,”—

“Amytis?” said Arrion in a startled voice.



"Even so; but she is strange. I know not if she favoureth me; her looks are variable, sometimes she smiles and then she frowns, and her eyes frighten me. I would she smiled not, nor regarded me. But she gave me this cloak in which to wrap myself, and bade me steal to find thee."

"To find me?" he drew a deep breath, trembling. How could Amytis know that he awaited her?

"Even so; she hath promised to protect me, but I know not what ailed the eunuch at the doorway of the harem. Ever since I came into the service of Hamestris, he hath looked kindly on me, but to-night he drew his sword as I passed by him, but I saw him and fled so quickly," she laughed a little, nervously, "that as he drew it and suddenly turned to follow me he slipped upon the marble floor, and in a moment I had left him far behind. His face was red and angry as he fell, but when I looked back, Arrion,

he smiled and sheathed his sword. Why should he wish to harm me? The Princess told me he would let me pass in safety."

Arrion shuddered, but was silent, daring not to frighten her. 'Twas plain, Amytis had planned the murder of the maiden. With an effort he controlled himself. "And the guard at the entrance of the palace, they did not molest thee?"

"No, Arrion, they were sleeping, heavy with wine, it seemed, and I stole past them. But they will be waking with the sunrise. I cannot tarry. Speak Arrion, hast thou found a way to help me? The time is short and I fear."

Arrion held her closely.

"Each day the women anoint me for the initiation. Often they kneel before me, and often I hear them whispering. What mean they, Arrion? Can a mortal maid be bride of any idol? They lie, those false priests. Tell me, beloved, What mean they?"



"Thou knowest not what awaits thee, Miriam? Must I tell thee?" He turned away his eyes. How could he find the words? "On the seventh day of the week," he spoke in a hard, strange voice, "the last day of Nisan, when falleth the last festival of the New Year, the golden image of Bel-Merodach is conducted from Borsippa to the market place. Thou, my Miriam, shalt proceed from the palace, shalt mount the car of the idol, and go thence in the sight of all the people to the temple, there to sacrifice to Bel at the high altar—" he stopped. She was silent, still looking calmly at him.

"Then, at night, at night, thou shalt ascend with Hadar to the upper shrine. There he will brand thee." His words were a low whisper of horror, "O Miriam, Miriam! on thy forehead with the accursed sign of Bel, and then leave thee, alone, to await the god, thy bridegroom!"

Still she was silent, not a word, not a

sign. Dare he look at her? He went on, each word dropping heavy as a stone from his white lips.

"There thou shalt remain, imprisoned till thy death, thy life forfeit if thou leavest the temple."

He had kept his eyes averted, but now he turned to look into her face. It was white as frozen snow, the eyes immobile. Suddenly he burst into sobs and snatching her to his breast, murmured inarticulate, vague words of love and terror.

"This fair brow burnt with the accursed mark! O the idolators! blasphemers! What torture that it should be I to make known this horror to thee!"

She did not speak and they clung together swept on the same flood of terror and despair.

Blind hatred and revolt blazed scarlet in the brain of the young Jew. His thoughts whirled dizzily. Should he kill her here, now in his arms, unmarred, loving and pure? Should they flee?