

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

Miriam was the first to speak, her mind regaining its consciousness slowly as from a sudden blow. She drew away from his embrace, her serious, clear eyes, looking at him with a dim wonder, like a child waking helplessly as from a dream.

"Thou speakest truth, Arrion?" she faltered.

"No, no," he answered wildly, "it shall not be. There must be help." Themistocles will aid us. He is powerful with the King. I will snatch thee from the car, I will appeal to Artaxerxes, before the people I will denounce the priests."

Still no word, no sigh from the silent girl as she listened to his frantic words. Slowly the light came back to her eyes, slowly as a wave that rises in a quiet sea, a wonderful courage filled her frightened heart, and as he gazed in his frenzy upon her calm face, so white and pure, he fell silent, awestruck and wondering.

She rose to her feet and raised her

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eyes upward to the starlit sky, slow tears flowed down her face, but her voice fell clearly upon the silence.

X "O Lord! Whose heart above rests not,

"O Lord! Whose heart below rests not.

"Hear us in our sore distress.

"Weeping is our veil, and tears our food.

"O Jehovah! thou art mighty!

"Let not our enemies prevail.

"In my trouble thou wert with thy hand-maiden; the false gods smote me not, although the false priests cursed me. The thunderbolts of Bel descended not, the arrows of Nergal pierced me not." X

She paused, still looking upward, and in her shining eyes there dawned the rapture of a visionary, mystic, innocent and inspired. She seemed to forget that she was not alone, her soul caught up as in a dream. Like a young priestess communing with the stars she stood, her white

garments, moon-illumined, falling like a violet mist about her, and again to Arrion's adoring gaze she seemed a creature not quite earthly, touched with heavenly fire. A sudden wind from out the waning night tossed aside the branches of the palm trees, and Arrion's eyes followed hers as they dwelt upon the open starlit sky. Clouds were passing over the deep blue vault, driven before the hurrying breeze, and stars and clouds together fled in rapid flight across their sight.

"I see," cried the girl in the voice of one who dreams, "I see the hosts of evil battling in the clouds, Nergal and Bel, Ishtar and Belit, arrayed for conflict with Jehovah. I hear the thunder of their warfare, I see the lightning of their swords." Her words rushed rapidly from her open lips in the exaltation of her vision, and Arrion trembled as he gazed upon her. Suddenly, as if a door had opened in the east, the shadows lightened, a broad radiance, the deceiving phantom of

false dawn, suffused the sky, and a rushing wind blew suddenly from over the horizon's edge. Miriam's voice rose to a joyful cry.

"Ah, see!" she cried, "Jehovah cometh. On the wings of the dawn he walketh. Hearest thou not the wind of his coming?" she paused, bending her ear. "The rivers listen and the marshes mourn. Behold," she pointed to the rays of light which rising quickly illumined all the sky. "His face shineth like an image of silver, and in his eyes is the shadow of the forest. ^Y Lo! He marshalleth his forces. ^Y The seven winds rush to his command. ^Y The cloud hosts gather. See, oh see!" she cried out to the night, "See how the false gods fight against him, Nergal and Bel-Merodach and Ishtar, but they fall, they fall, as the stars from heaven they fall! Jehovah is mighty, and will prevail." Her voice broke into cries and exclamations. "Falling, falling, I see them falling. The false gods fall, their false priests are confounded, the

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idols are broken in the desert sand. They are gone, they are utterly destroyed, destroyed!"

She stopped, swaying, and as Arrion caught her he saw that the hallucination of her vision had departed; she was a girl again, human and tender, and she trembled in her lover's arms.

"Ah Miriam!" he said soothingly, "thine eyes see visions unknown to mortal sight. God is God, but will he help us? Will he stoop from heaven to aid? I fear no idols, but these men, the King who desireth thee, the cruel priests. Where shall we turn for help against them? If I fail, if Themistocles is powerless, if there is no help under all the sky,—" he looked up despairingly and gazed about him. The shadows were still dark around them, but the leaves were stirring with a gentle breeze, and through their branches the stars gleamed like fireflies in a net of green. The air was soft and fragrant with the breath of many flowers. In the

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deep solitude the fountain murmured like a voice, melodious, secret, as it were the spirit of the place. Arrion lifted his hand, "Listen," he said, "it speaks a message to us." Leaning close together they bent over the fountain. Inscribed in golden letters around the brim was a warning written in Chaldean, Assyrian and Persian, "Whosoever drinketh of this fountain shall surely die. Sacred to the Kings of Shushan."

The same thought vibrated through their minds, but 'twas Miriam who spoke.

"Shall we drink, beloved?"

"And then defy the King to slay us," answered Arrion, in what seemed the self-same whisper. "We have but to wake yonder sleeping guard and tell him we have tasted of the fountain."

They bent nearer and nearer to the water's edge and there was a great stillness, and only the silver rippling fell upon their ears, when suddenly stirring in the branches above their heads a bird broke

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into song, a song so joyful, so exultant, so bubbling with life and love, that it seemed the very voice of Spring. Arrion stooped and lifting the dark curls which fell over Miriam's averted face he looked into those deep and dreaming eyes.

"Wouldst die, my dove? Life may be sweet as that bird's song. Ah, let us wait and hope."

Miriam shook back her curling hair and slowly the colour crept again into her pale face.

"Thou wilt be with me, Arrion?" she cried. "Swear to me that I shall not live to spend the night upon that tower. Else I drink!"

"Miriam," answered Arrion, solemnly, "I swear. If there be no other help, I will be with thee in the temple by thy side, the tower is high, beloved. We will cast ourselves from the height. Naught shall divide us, not life, not death. Thou dost not fear?"

Miriam laid her two hands upon the

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shoulders of Arrion and looked gladly into his face.

"I love thee, Arrion," she said simply, "and I will not fear."

"Miriam," said Arrion in a low and quivering voice, "my soul, my flower of all delight. Heaven guard thee, watch over thee."

Standing in the shadowed solitude as in a temple the mysteries of the silent, star-lit night comforted their souls and they fell into the sweet converse of lovers, forgetful of their grief and only conscious of each other.

"Ah, Miriam! I love thee," sighed Arrion, caressing with a gentle hand her bending head. "Thy breath is life, thy hair is dark as the sweet night, and fragrant as myrrh, thy voice refresheth me like the sound of flowing waters. Thy lips are honey and the honey-comb. O cup of spring, I drink thee!" His lips melted upon hers.

About them the forest seemed to wake

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to life, and innumerable little stirs and murmurs filled the bending trees. The starlight vanished from the green canopy of leaves, and shyly the sunrays crept in and fell across their faces.

"Beloved," sighed he, as if waking from a dream, "the dawn is here."

"'Tis the darkness comes," she said, "for I must leave thee."

"How can I let thee go?" he answered, still clasping her.

"Bless me, Arrion, ere I go, and say again that naught shall part us."

"For life or death, thou art mine," he answered solemnly. "Jehovah guard thee."

"And I am thine," she answered, "till my soul passeth to the winds."

They stood for a moment more, enraptured, in a brief oblivion, gazing at each other.

Miriam's face shone pale and purely like a pearl in the early radiance of the rising day, and Arrion's scarlet dress

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glowed in the lightening shade. The morning dawned. Reluctantly, she veiled her face and, like a shadow, vanished among the trees. Arrion listened to her footfall, until silence came again. Then cautiously he roused the guard, and made his way to the edge of the terrace and stood awhile looking down upon the waking city. All was silent still and the joy of his meeting with Miriam remained in his heart like a benediction. He looked down upon the descending terraces of the gardens, upon the great trees waving in the morning breeze, the fountains glinting in the level rays of the rising sun. About him grew a thicket of yellow acacia and at the edge of the terrace the scarlet blossoms of the flowering quince shone like gems, prismatic, glittering. Southward lay the palace, massive and silent, all its doorways shut, its gardens slumbering in the lingering shadows. The light just touched the top of the surrounding walls, turning to a rosy red the painted brick-

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work. Beyond the river, flowing darkly between its guarding walls, rose the ancient citadel of the Chaldean kings, fallen now to tumbling ruin on its broad terraces, and towards the north, the mighty tower of Bel's temple lifted its gilded shrine high up in the air, and all the wonderful city lay there, outspread before him, bathed in opal mist. Day opened like a flower with heart of fire.

Arrion knelt there in an ecstasy. In his exaltation all the sounds of the awakening morning fell with a singular distinctness upon his ears. The cries of the birds, the tinkling of the fountains, the flowers, the sunlight, all mingled in the impression that life was fleeing, that time was passing. A sensation, painful yet sweet, intoxicated him, a sensation of the unreality of earthly things. Suddenly a murmur of voices broke upon the silence. In the shadows below he caught the gleam of a priest's garment, and presently two figures emerged upon the terrace just

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beneath him. He held his breath with astonishment, for he saw it was the King himself, in simple dress and unattended, and that the priest was Hadar. Concealed in the thicket of flowering acacia, Arrion heard their words quite plainly in the clear stillness of the morning.

"Thou wilt not deceive me," said the King's voice threateningly, "else shalt thou lose thy head. I yielded to thee at the feast, but the guards are not always drunken. I warn thee."

"May the King live forever!" replied the harsh voice of the priest. "Bel is propitious as he hath ever been to Artaxerxes, and he will wait for the maiden, if only the King will keep his word."

"Artaxerxes lies not, Holiness." Arrion shuddered as he listened. "The maiden shall be restored to thee, only at first she shall be mine. I care not for the leavings of the priests."

"The priests?" answered Hadar in an

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obsequious voice, "Miriam ministers only to Bel."

"To Bel or Nebo or Nergal, it matters not to me, so that thou keep her for me. 'Tis understood? I come at midnight to the upper shrine. See that I find her safe. Let no touch of iron mar her beauty. Lay not a hand upon her. Stir not beyond the threshold! Thou hast heard?"

"I hear, O King! and then?"

"It matters not. When it is my will I will return her. I have spoken."

"And my reward?" asked the priest again. "It will be difficult for the priests to convince the people that Bel tarries for his bride."

"Have done, Hadar. I have told thee that I will exalt thee above Ashpenaz and thy brethren, that thy word shall be law among the Chaldeans and the astrologers, and that thou shalt be supreme in the temple, and shalt have power to interpret the will of Bel. To thee and thee alone

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shall be made known his will, when he desires his bride." And Artaxerxes laughed, a low laugh of scorn which turned Arrion's young blood to ice, and then to fire.

"'Tis well," answered the priest. "May the King live forever. May his kingdom stretch from sea to sea."

"Enough, enough," said Artaxerxes, impatiently, "Begone, thy God has need of sacrifices. 'Tis the hour of the morning oblation, the gnomon marks the sunrise."

Arrion had heard each word, and as he leaned forward, crushing the yellow bloom of the acacias, he heard the footsteps of the King, echoing on the marble stairs and far below saw the hurrying figure of the priest, descending to the plain. And then with heart on fire, he found his way down the long flight of alabaster steps, through the outer gardens of the palace enclosure, and so into the city. The long day stretched before him ere he could hope to see Themistocles, but if he hastened he might

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find Nehemiah. He turned his steps towards the Jew's quarter. The sun was rising in the clear blue sky. The city was awake.

X

All day Arrion had searched for Nehemiah, and had failed to find him. In the market place during the early morning hours he had sought for him among the crowds of merchants, of soothsayers and of image sellers, and had found him not; under the blazing sun of midday he had wandered through all of the quarter of the Jews, hurrying in ever growing impatience and dismay from street to street, and had then turned his steps towards the Nana road, which leads through the gates of Ninus out into the gardens and the cornfields which lie between the great walls of the Imgur and Nivitti Bel, thinking to find the prophet in that palace by the Nahr Malcha where the great canal joins the Euphrates. Here under the wil-