

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

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-

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lows growing thickly by the smoothly flowing stream, Nehemiah was wont to assemble the Jews in the cool of the late afternoon to exhort and to pray with them. But Arrion was weary, and when he reached the gate he saw with dismay that the gnomon marked the sun's last quarter and that he could never hope to reach the meeting place of the Jews and return in time to be present at the banquet of Themistocles, to which he was bidden at the hour after nightfall, for he was on the opposite side of the city from the house of the Greek, which lay southwest, towards Borsippa, between the college of the Chaldeans and Nebo's temple of the seven spheres. Arrion halted at the gate and rested a moment under the shadow of its brazen portals, then he turned back, and passing the temple of Melitta with its crowds of worshippers, he went on wearily until he reached an arm of the Shebil canal which turned towards the Euphrates, and reaching one of the

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river gates he passed within and descended the slippery steps to the edge of the swiftly flowing stream. Arrion was known to the gate-keeper, but he asked in vain for a boat to convey him to the southern boundary of the city. The man was obsequious but obdurate.

He had no boat, it was growing late, it was madness to attempt to cross the city and make the Cissian gate by nightfall. The young lord knew full well what would happen to any keeper whose gate was found open after legal hours.

Arrion looked impatiently up the long stretch of the river, hoping that some belated fisher's boat or merchant's skiff might pass in which he could take passage. And in the shadows of the towering walls which rose to a sheer height of fifty feet above the rushing stream, he descried one of the round Armenian boats coming rapidly towards him. Arrion waved his staff.

"Boatmen," he cried, "two manehs if thou wilt carry me to the southern gate."

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The boat swerved towards the landing place.

"Hasten, young master," said the man, "and I will take thee." Arrion leaped lightly into the boat and the current swept it into the midst of the stream. It was a belated merchant, with his donkey, his crates of cheese and his heavy gourds of wine, hastening to deposit his wares at the market-place, which was situated near the southern wall of the city at the eastern extremity of the great bridge of Semiramis.

There was little room for Arrion in the boat, but the river bore it swiftly on, and, lying very still so as not to upset the frail craft, he looked up at the fantastically painted walls as they fled by him and was grateful to be still. Mind and body were exhausted. He thought only of Themistocles and the help which he prayed that he might give him.

Straight across the city the river flowed between its towering painted walls and

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above them, as they floated by in the rushing current of the stream, Arrion, looking towards the right could see the mighty towers of the palace, the waving palms of the hanging gardens, and towards the left the ruined citadel of Neriglissar. Through the open portals of the river gates he caught glimpses of the great thoroughfares, which intersected the city from left to right, street scenes and vistas flashed on his sight as they rushed by, and soon they reached the great bridge of Semiramis over which a multitude of people and vehicles were hurrying, and passing under they swept up to the Cissian gate. Alighting on the other side of the tower, Arrion paid the boatman who had barely time to turn his bobbing craft again towards the market place when the trumpet sounded nightfall, and with a clang, the portcullis with its formidable iron gratings, sharp as the teeth of a crocodile, descended and the city was closed until another day. Arrion paused

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a moment, looking over the plain. Before his eyes the suburbs of Babylon lay outspread, villas and gardens in the shadow of the artificial hills, orchards and cornfields intersected by a network of canals, all shaded with luxuriant trees and hanging vines. The sunrays lit into blazing glory the brazen gates, and the gigantic figures on the painted walls. Arrion pulled his cap down over his eyes to keep out the sunrays, and took his way along the river bank until he reached one of the irrigating canals, which led past the house of the Greek. Themistocles dwelt habitually at Magnesia, the city given him by Artaxerxes, but while at Babylon, engaged as he was in the study of Magianism and astronomy, he had built a house among the Chaldees near the college, and erected a tower of observation. Arrion could see it among a number of other and similar towers, cone-shaped and shining with the brilliant red and blue of enamelled brickwork among the waving palms and tama-

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risks which lined the bank of the canal. Many of the Chaldeans, who represented the aristocracy of the Babylon, lived in the suburbs which lay between the outer and the inner walls of the city. As Arrion proceeded on his way he met many of the rich inhabitants of the neighbouring villas emerging from their houses after the heat of the day, and walking leisurely by the banks of the canal under the shadow of the trees. Women in rich dresses, strangely embroidered with fantastic animals and with pictures of the chase, walked by him with indolent grace. Their splendid brown arms and throats were encircled with many gems, their beautiful firm breasts were half disclosed under a floating scarf of gauze which was clasped with a golden lotus flower over the right shoulder and under the left arm. They were followed by the Indian dogs then in so much favor at Babylon, and attendant slaves waved above their heads fans of peacock and ostrich feathers to keep off

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the flies which swarmed in numbers by the water side. At a little distance, near the college of the Chaldees, Arrion could see groups of white-robed priests and soothsayers, easily distinguished by their flounced robes and their long floating veils. As he neared the house of Themistocles, he saw that the pillars of the gate in the enclosing wall were wreathed with garlands of tulips and of lotus, and as he stepped within the garden the sound of music floated to him with the breath of flowers. Themistocles had built his house after the manner of the Ionian dwellings, enclosing a great garden or court which was planted thickly with the flowers of his native Attica. In the center splashed a fountain of tinted water shedding rosy drops like liquid ruby over the white and purple violets which grew thickly around its basin. At the northern end the cone-shaped tower of the observatory appeared above the towering palms. Around the enclosures were statues of the Gods of

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Greece, Dionysus, god of wine, Hermes, Aphrodite and Apollo, and before an altar hung with ivy wreaths stood a beautiful figure of Artemis Aristobule of good council, that goddess whom he was thought to have too greatly honoured in ungrateful Athens. Here again in the home of his exile, Themistocles had erected an altar to her, with the assurance that here at least he would not be thought to honour himself and his own wisdom too highly in giving praise to her.

As the night was warm, Themistocles had ordered that the feast should be laid in the garden, and the couches were accordingly placed in the shadows of the covered portico which ran around three sides of the house. The light still lingered in the sky, and blazing torches were set in bronze tripods at the angles of the court, making a rival light with the luminous clear heavens, lit by the moon's bright lamp.

The guests entered in groups of two and

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three, and were received by the attendants who conducted them to the porch and offered them bowls of perfumed water in which to wash away the dust of their journey. Arrion who was weary with his long day of fruitless search was grateful for these moments of repose and refreshment, and while the slaves were preparing him for the feast, he strove to collect his distracted thoughts.

Themistocles reclined on the cushions of an ivory-footed couch raised high above the flower-grown court, receiving his assembling guests. He had put off the dress of the King's sons-in-law, that embroidered purple dress which it had been the King's pleasure to bestow upon him, and this evening he was clad in the Grecian robes which he had been accustomed to wear at feasts in Athens and Sparta. His face was very pale, but his eyes shone with a brilliancy which brought back the beauty of his youth. His heroic features were sharpened and clear as a statue's, he

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wore a garland of ivory and of purple violets and his perfumed hair was curled and fastened after the manner of the Greeks with golden grasshoppers. He received his friends with a fitting word for everyone, calling them all by name, and addressing each with a faultless memory for the life and wishes of them all. Before the altar were bound bulls and goats ready for sacrifice, and wine and perfumes prepared for the libations. The air was heavy with the breath of flowers, and with fragrant frankincense which floated from the smoking censers. Flute players from Greece and Lesbian harp players made music in the porch, a faint and delicious accompaniment to the happy words and gay laughter which filled the garden with a murmurous pleasant sound. All felt at ease and happy, and as the attendants passed from guest to guest crowning each curled head with flowers, a mellow calm, like the soft breath of the twilight came upon them, and they reclined at ease upon

the cushions of their couches, rejoicing in the coolness of the blossoming garden, the enchantment of the music. Arrion, who had tarried a few moments in the porch, came in quietly and was bidden to a couch reserved for him near to his master. He looked about the assemblage with astonishment. Never had he seen Themistocles so lavish of hospitality in Babylon. Many strangers from Ionia, from Caria, and from Macedonia passing through Babylon were at the feast.

Directly facing the couch of Themistocles, was a table set for the high officers of the court, the Rabsaki or vizier, the Chamberlain, Halalat, the astronomer royal, who had spent many days with the great exile in the study of the stars, and Bakit Alsi, the music director of the palace. The table was of ivory, with feet of carved and gilded pine cones, and the guests, seated about it, rested their pointed shoes upon ivory stools carved like the table. They were

dressed in elaborate embroidered court garments, heavily fringed and decked with gems. Their curled and perfumed hair was adorned with fillets caught with a triple rosette of gold and each wore a seal hanging from a braceleted wrist. As they took their places, Themistocles looked towards them, greeting each by his name and title, and raising high his wine cup, while they with one accord raised their cups on high, pledging Themistocles in the toast of welcome. To the right of the Greek, the warriors of the Persian and the Babylonian armies reclined at ease on cushioned couches, Alorus, the captain of the guard, conspicuous among them all. This Persian soldier was high in the favour of Artaxerxes; his father had been with Xerxes in the war against Greece, and the son was held in great honour by the King, and laden with jewels and with offices.

Towards the left a grave company of astrologers and archimages overlooked the

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scene from their high carved chairs. Near to the couch of Themistocles were grouped his sons and daughters, summoned from Magnesia; Mnesipila, named after the teacher and councillor of his youth was at his feet; Sybaris and Nicomache stood near, clad in Greek garments flowing gracefully, their golden hair bound with fillets of ivy and its yellow flowers; and Asia, the child of his old age, rested on the same couch as her father, her dark hair wreathed about with a bright garland of scarlet quince blossoms, red as her young mouth. Arrion in his richly embroidered scarlet dress had his place among the children of the master. His young face was pale with fatigue, but shining like a lamp with excitement and with hope. The beautiful daughters of the Greek and the young cupbearer made together an enchanting group of youth and beauty. Arrion gazed at his master with astonishment and loving fear. He no longer saw the reverend sage clad in the

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garments of the Persian court, as he had known him in his later days, but in this triumphant figure in his Grecian robes, he seemed to see the real Themistocles, the conqueror of Salamis.

His great dark eyes blazed with an unaccustomed fire, his full lips, those lips of human beauty and of passion, which he had inherited from his slave mother, were scarlet as in youth and curved with a strange smile of pride and sadness. The noble head was held high with a majestic air of power and mysterious intent.

Arrion looked intently at his master, hoping and fearing, while he listened to the words of greeting which he gave to his guests.

"Wine for my guests," cried Themistocles, as he saluted them, "and drink as ye will."

On either side of the fountain were set tables of ivory inlaid with gold and laden with viands and with deep bowls of wine. Attendant slaves, clad in Persian gar-

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ments, passed food to the guests and ladled out the wine in goblets of lapis lazuli, and of carven gold and silver.

Sybaris and Nicomache sang together Sapphic verses, followed by odes of Anacreon in praise of love and wine, to the accompaniment of harps and dulcimers. The guests joined in the singing, and anon played at capping lines of Persian and Chaldean verse and amused themselves in putting riddles to each other, while one and another recounted tales of battle and the chase, or called on a fresh narrator for stories of prowess or adventure. An Assyrian poet renowned for his paraphrases of Akkadean poetry and Assyrian mythology, sang to the accompaniment of psalteries playing softly, a long story of Ishtar and of Tammuz and the wanderings of the goddess in the dim under regions of the spirits while she searched for her love. And the guests shuddered as he sang of the spirits of the dead, those sad unhappy ones who fly as

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bats, condemned to eternal darkness and whose food is dust; but his song was hopeful and enchanting as he told of the fountain of life, bubbling up at the very foot of Ea's throne. And he sang of the river of oblivion, Datilla, with the flowering banks, which flows through the fields of the lower world and of that land of the happy gods where they bask forever under a silver sky. And then the young Babylonian soldiers sang hymns to Ishtar, lady of love, and odes to Shamas and to Sin, lords of the day and of the night. And then they turned, all the guests together, and called aloud to Themistocles.

"Tell us of thy battles, O Themistocles!" but Themistocles shook his head and translated for them in the liquid Persian tongue these lines of Sappho:

"Come, Venus, come,
Hither with thy golden cup
Where Nectar-floated flowerets swim.
Fill, fill the goblet up
These laughing lips shall kiss the brim,
Come, Venus, come."