

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

"Diana," he whispered, "Lady of victories! Smile upon us—we have saved Greece. Ah! the fire burns over Eleusis! The gods are joyful! I see ye, spirits of dead heroes, ye are with us in a cloud about the ships. The day is ours."

He ceased a moment, struggling in the arms of Arrion, then suddenly he rose to his full height, his voice ringing out full-toned and persuasive, resonant as in youth; "More ships, Athenians, more ships!" Then like a lamp extinguished, the light faded from his eyes and he fell forward, silent.

XI

The gates swung open with a loud clang, as morning broke over Babylon. The last day of the festival, which had been ushered in by the King's banquet in honour of Mithras, had arrived. From the first until the fifteenth day of Nisan the streets had been gay with processions and merry with feasting in honour of the gods of Persia and of Babylon. The palace had been open daily to the guests and subjects of the King, and thousands had sat at the royal table. All the city feasted.

As soon as morning dawned, messengers from Borsippa, bringing the news of the death of Themistocles hurried to the palace, and soon the rumour spread among the excited crowds of people who filled the streets. The insult put upon

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Megabysus had been deeply resented by many of the soldiers, and the cruel death of Inarus had shocked even the most brutal of the Babylonians. Rumours of a rising in Syria under Megabysus had reached the city through the reports of the strangers who had come to Babylon for the annual feasts of Nisan, and now the suicide of Themistocles added to the disquiet of the people. Arrion, who had spent the long hours of the night by the body of his master, reached the city gates by sunrise and hastened through the streets towards the house of Mariamne. On his way he was questioned anxiously by many who knew of his close relation with the Greek as to the cause of his suicide. At the corners of the streets and in the rapidly filling squares he passed groups of Babylonian nobles and soldiers of the Persian army earnestly discussing the disquieting news. Arrion marked their excited gestures as he passed.

The civilians were dressed in their state

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robes with their signets and golden-headed canes, and the soldiers were in full uniform in honour of the closing festival, in honour of the return of the god Bel from his annual visit to the temple of Nebo at Borsippa.

"The King deals unwisely with his generals," he heard an old soldier say in an angry voice. "Megabysus in revolt and Themistocles driven to suicide! Artaxerxes must look to his empire." These were the murmurs which fell upon his ears as he hastened through the city streets. In many squares companies of soldiers were already being marshalled in readiness for the great procession of the day, and he was often delayed in his long journey. The sun's rays were shining over the city walls when at last he reached the house of Mariamne. He found her in the courtyard with her maidens, wailing and weeping and casting ashes in her long black hair. She greeted him almost angrily in the agony of her grief.

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"Hast thou naught to tell me, Arrion," she asked, "can Themistocles do nothing for us?"

"Mariamne, Mother!" answered Arrion, keeping back his tears, "be not angry, Themistocles is dead, dead by his own hand."

"He is dead? Oh, misery," cried the stricken woman, "and wherefore?"

"The King commanded him, as thou knowest, to lead his armies against Greece. He has paid for the favour of Artaxerxes, for he has given him his life."

"His life? his death rather," answered Mariamne, wringing her hands; "and what doth that profit him or us, could he not have tarried to aid us?"

Arrion took the weeping Mariamne in his arms and tried to comfort and to calm her, but womanlike she continued her distracted questionings.

"Hast thou seen Nehemiah, Arrion? Surely he might help us. Oh, 'tis the day, the very day! Miriam, Miriam, my inno-

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cent child," she cried in agony, "can naught be done to save thee from the infamous priests?"

"Nehemiah has seen the King and has not prevailed with him," answered Arrion in deep discouragement, "even now he trembles to incur the anger of Artaxerxes. All day I sought for him, ere I repaired to the house of Themistocles and the brethren told me that he is heavily cast down and troubled. But he may not further importune the King. There is overmuch to be done in the gathering together of the timber from the King's forests, the collecting of the sacred vessels, and at the changing of the moon he must begin the journey across the desert, thou knowest that the time is short."

Grief had quite changed the gentle Mariamne, and she interrupted him chidingly—"Thou hast not seen him, not even seen him, Arrion?"

"I searched for him all day, I told thee, O my mother," Arrion repeated,

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breaking into tears, "and I could not find him, and now 'tis too late. I know not what to do."

"And the King himself," she continued, "thou art his favourite, Arrion, he hath loved thee well. Canst thou not prevail with him?"

Arrion looked with despair upon Mariamne. He dared not tell her of the infamous bargain of the priest and the King, nor of the promise which Miriam and he had made to each other—to leap together from the tower should all else fail, so he listened to her wailing and reproaches, ignorant how to answer her.

"Thou art the cupbearer. What is thy office worth if it serve not to gain the ear of the King?"

"I have not seen the King since Nehemiah returned from Shushan; it has not been my turn to serve at the royal table. To-day I stand by his side on the pavilion while he reviews the procession. Mariamne, pray for me, if it be thy will I will

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try to have speech with him. But let me go. I can no longer stay to comfort thee. The priests are already on their way from Borsippa with the cursed idol. The King will soon leave the palace. I must be at the market place. Thou knowest that there, before the temple of the sun, Artaxerxes will review the procession and that there Miriam will meet the chariot of the god."

Mariamne veiled her face. "I know, my son, the hand of Jehovah is heavy upon us. Go then, and tarry not."

As Arrion hastened through the streets he met crowds of people in chariots and hurrying multitudes on foot proceeding to the market place. Reaching the bridge of Semiramis he could see through the open gates the long procession of the priests winding towards the city, with the gigantic statue of the god glittering in the sunshine. According to the ancient customs of the Chaldean worship, Bel-Merodach, the mighty, having made his yearly

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visit to E-Zida, Nebo's temple at Borsippa, was now returning to his own abode at E-Sagila. Throned in the sacred ship he proceeded on his homeward journey convoyed by the priests of the seven-sphered temple of the plain.

On the other side of the bridge, the market place was filled already with a surging, multicoloured throng. Towards the east the bridge with its great arches spanned the stream of the Euphrates, towards the west the temple of Shamas with its symbolic golden suns blazed in the torrid radiance of the rising day, and towards the north the pavilion of the King rose thronelike above the crowd. As Arrion made his way through the market place, he could hear the people murmuring and caught words here and there of comment and of inquiry from the strangers assembled to watch the procession. Further within the great square he saw a motley crowd of Medes, of Thracians, of Assyrians, and among them the strange

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Gysanti from Libya, their bodies stained with mercury, looking curiously upon the thronging multitudes and with strange cries and uncouth gestures offering honey for sale. Assembled in one corner was a band of brightly clothed Arabs, with their gayly harnessed camels fresh from the desert, and groups of veiled slave girls brought to Babylon for sale. Egyptians made their way among the crowds offering tissues of fine linen, fragrant oils and cedar boxes full of spices. Brown Indians, straight and slim, carried on their heads baskets of carved ivory and teakwood. Arrion looked at their pathetic velvet eyes with curiosity and a dim wonder at the mystery of their subtle intellectual faces, but he was so overwrought with his sleepless nights of agony and the fruitless days of hope and fear, so broken with the shock of Themistocles' death, that he hardly kept command of his own mind and consciousness. As he wandered restlessly among the throng waiting for the

appearance of the King he had a strange sensation as of walking in a dream. The bright and moving crowds seemed to him unreal, part of a fable or a tale which he was reading, and in which he had no part. He could with difficulty fix his mind on anything, only a confused murmur as of many meaningless voices filled his brain, while his eyes were fixed upon the golden towers of the temple of Shamas glittering under the sunrays. The brilliant blue sky, the air itself, incandescent, sunlit, and vibrating with the many sounds of the thronging multitudes, thrilled through his brain in thunders of colour, light and sound. With a despairing impulse for help, Arrion made his way to the corner of the market place where were assembled the Jew merchants and money lenders, easily distinguishable among the crowd by the blue and white fringes which edged their robes. They were busy recording their transactions on the soft clay of their tablets, taking advantage of the hours before

the passing of the procession to profit by the extra trade which came from the presence of so many strangers in the market place. They would have none of Arrion.

"What is it to us," they said, "if the maiden is to become the bride of the god? 'tis an honour to any woman, be she Jew or Babylonian; we are busy, the hour of the procession approaches, trouble us not." Arrion turned away, sick at heart and despairing, knowing that they too were well aware of the fate which was in store for this free born maiden of their people. As he made his way among the crowd, a god-seller, wrinkled and old, accosted him.

"Gods for sale, young master, gods for sale! Thou art a Jew, but thy race is honoured to-day in Babylon. A Jewish maiden is chosen to be the bride of Bel. Buy a Bel! Buy a Bel!"

Arrion put his fingers in his ears and fled in horror. The old man grinned and

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his small eyes twinkled as he turned to a fortune-teller, who had a booth near him and who was selling charms to ward off evil spirits.

"Didst thou see the young man, Bakit-Ali? Methinks 'tis Arrion, the King's cupbearer. He seems not to like this marriage. In truth Bel-Merodach would be an awkward rival." The fortune-teller chuckled.

"Ah, the priests! They are always in luck. Fine fellows they! It profits more methinks, Urtaki, to worship than to sell the gods."

The moments now passed rapidly, for the procession was nearing the gates. Arrion made his way to the pavilion of the King. Amytis was already there with the Queen-mother, loaded with jewels and attended by a guard of eunuchs and soldiers. They sat on carved ivory chairs on either side of the glittering throne erected for the King, and surveyed the gathering multitude with curiosity. As

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Arrion approached and took his allotted place at the right of the royal throne he encountered the implacable gaze of Amytis. Then she turned away her eyes and only the cruel smile upon her painted lips betrayed her knowledge of his presence.

As the hour approached the waiting people pressed nearer and nearer to the temple of Shamas, and crowded close to the pavilion of the King. A sudden bray of trumpets signalling the arrival of the priests of Nebo at the city gates, tore the air, and at the same moment, the chariot of Artaxerxes dashed in full flight around the temple of the Sun. Holding the reins lightly in his hands, he leaned forward, with his eyes ablaze, a splendid figure of kingly beauty and magnificence.

"How furiously drives the King," exclaimed Beladon, the chief eunuch, to Arrion, as they stood together on the steps of the pavilion.

"Artaxerxes ever delights to show his