

skill in horsemanship to the people," answered Arrion.

"And in truth he driveth well," rejoined the eunuch. "Xerxes himself was not a better horseman. No, nor bolder in the chase."

The people looked up at Artaxerxes with awe and worship as he towered in his splendid height above them all. On his head the royal tiara blazed with jewels, and his robes of state were heavy with embroidery and gems.

On came the chariot in a forest of waving golden wands, borne by white-robed runners, and behind, alike at a running pace, came the spearmen of the Persian army, the doriphoroi, sacred to the King, their silver spears glittering in the sunshine. The horses of Artaxerxes, pure-blooded, famous throughout the kingdom, lifted their proud heads, tinkling with silver bells, and shook the gilded lotus flowers which bound their throats. Their flowing tails, tied with floating

sashes of scarlet, streamed in the wind of their flying feet. The gilded chariot gleamed in the sunlight. Painted quivers filled with arrows, richly inlaid, hung at the monarch's side, and at the back of the chariot in the calyx of a bronze lotus flower was fixed his shining spear. From the yoke of the chariot shining with chrysolites and beryls, rose two figures of Ninus and of Bel, carved in gold, and between them a golden eagle spread its outstretched wings. The glittering cavalcade swept by and, swinging in a circle round the roaring market place, drew up to the pavilion. Artaxerxes leaped from the chariot and, tossing the reins over the trembling horses, mounted the steps amid the shouts and cries of people, and took his place upon the throne. And he smiled as a great shout of welcome swayed through the vibrating air. At the gates across the stream another trumpet blast rose loud and startlingly shrill above the roar of the multitude, as the gigantic figure

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of the God, throned in his golden ship amid its convoy of white-robed priests, appeared upon the bridge. At this same moment in the midst of a guard of eunuchs from the palace Arrion saw Miriam approaching. Alone in her chariot she rode, helpless in the midst of the roaring multitude. Slowly the chariot advanced, the horses in their sweeping robes led by the eunuchs, while about her veiled women danced and sang. The air swayed with the rhythmical beating of tambourines and cymbals, and again and again the savage deafening bray of the trumpet shrieked above the roar of the crowd. The maiden stood erect and pale, her white face, under its barbaric crown of lapis lazuli and coral, rose fearless and pure above the splendid robes which fell in heavy folds about her. As she passed the throne of the King, her eyes turned as if in answer to the agonized gaze of Arrion and thus across the pitiless crowd, in cruel Babylon, Arrion and Miriam

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looked at one another. Not once did she falter, but passed before them, free-souled and brave, remembering their promise to each other. When the priestly cortége of the God drew towards her, without a murmur or a tremor, she descended from her chariot and mounting the car of the God, she took her place beside the idol.

At this moment, Arrion, mad with love and blind with agony, cast himself before the throne of Artaxerxes. The people gazed at him with fear and horror, knowing what it meant at such a time to brave the anger of the King. Pallid and trembling, but with eyes afire, he raised his voice, and cried aloud above the murmur of the people.

"O Artaxerxes, hear me! By the love which thou hast borne me, grant me the boon I ask of thee. 'Tis a free-born maiden of my people, a stranger in thy gates. Save, oh save her from the priests!" He lifted his wild, despairing face to the

King, crying aloud in his madness and despair, "O King, have mercy! Stop the procession. Thou knowest, thou knowest, 'tis a mockery."

Artaxerxes looked down upon the kneeling Arrion, with deep displeasure. "Thou art mad, Arrion," he replied, "and knowest little what thou sayest. Well dost thou remind me of my favour to thee, else this day would be thy last, but thou art young and rash." The wavering monarch paused a moment and then turned to Amytis.

"What shall be done with Arrion, my sister, death or a dungeon? Thou shalt decide."

"Death," answered Amytis, the word dropping like a stone from her scarce parted lips.

The King flushed darkly.

"Ah, thou art ungrateful! Hast forgotten that he preserved thy life?"

Amytis glanced once at the kneeling figure of Arrion and then downward to

where Miriam stood helpless by the side of the idol, and a gleam of life rippled over the masklike cruelty of her face.

"To prison with him, then," she cried in a quick and angry voice. "A dungeon may cool his ardour."

"Better so," exclaimed the King. Then he turned again to Arrion. "Call upon thy God to help thee, Arrion. No mortal, be he king or subject, may rob Bel of the maiden. The son of Merodach has spoken."

Arrion rose to his feet, realizing too late the hopelessness of any favour from the King, the folly of any prayer for mercy in the presence of the relentless Amytis. Ask pity of the woman he had scorned, of her who had planned the murder of Miriam? It was worse than madness. Restored at once to a white calm and dignity, the young Arrion cast one glance of contempt upon the vengeful, triumphant face of Amytis, and when Artaxerxes summoned a soldier of the

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guard and commanded that he should be conducted to prison, he submitted silently and before the eyes of Miriam was led away.

A look of horror dawned in the girl's face. Pitifully she stretched out her hands towards the departing figure of Arrion, who led by the guards, disappeared among the throng, and her eyes which before were calm and brave faltered now with terror, as half fainting she threw her arms about the great limbs of the idol. The roar of the multitude grew louder and with renewed shouts of worship and of triumph, the priests cried out their praise of Bel-Merodach, the bridegroom, mighty God.

"To the temple!" they shouted, "on to the gate of God! to the temple with the bridegroom and the bride."

And the people answered with wild cries and wilder dancing as the car of the God proceeded on its way. Before the chariot worshippers mad with ecstasy

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cast themselves prostrate, hoping thus to win a glorious death, and all along the road past the palace and the gardens, waiting crowds greeted the idol with shouts of praise and of worship, heaping flowers and palm leaves along its path. And so passed the great procession through the mighty city in a blaze of gold and glittering sunshine, amid songs and shouts of praise, on to the temple towering towards the sky. And to Miriam, deserted and alone, the journey was a dream of horror and despair. Hour after hour passed by, and the pitiless sun beat down upon them, until at last the procession drew up before the mighty enclosure. The gates were flung open and the people fell upon their knees as the priests with the car of the idol passed within. Close following came the King with his attendant guards. They alone passed beyond into the sacred square, and the gates were shut behind them. Far up to heaven the temple towered, rising in stages of de-

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creasing size up to the topmost crown of the Ziggurat, the gilded shrine of Bel. The walls which surrounded it were of immense height and thickness and were decorated with gigantic figures of symbolic animals impressed in the burnt brickwork and painted with crude colours. Above them the brilliant edifice loomed, gigantic, incredibly lofty and coloured like a prism in orange, yellow, scarlet and azure, the topmost stages overlaid with glittering plates of gold and silver. By day the turquoise sky surrounded it, and the rolling sun blazed on its gilded shrine. By night the sacred fire, aërial, starlike, flamed with a rival light among the shining spheres. A broad flight of marble steps led to the great platform of burnt and enamelled brickwork on which the mighty edifice was erected, and an outer diagonal stairway mounted from stage to stage of the temple up to the topmost shrine. Winged lions, gigantic and gilded, guarded the entrance to the great

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lower hall of sacrifice. Around the terrace rows of idols fantastically carved, looked towards the towering walls. Among these were altars for sacrifice, and in the midst of the south porch the great brazen sea, brought from Jerusalem and ready for the blood of the bulls.

As the procession entered the temple square, with the great statue of the returning god, it was greeted with a mighty shout of welcome from the priests who were stationed in line along the broad flight of steps which led to the first terrace. Magnificent in their flounced robes, their tonsured heads adorned with golden fillets and floating veils, they stood together on the marble steps, each bearing his staff of office.

Between them slowly marched the priests of Nebo, carrying home the god; from the car they lifted the gigantic figure, on their shoulders they bore him in his sacred ship, supporting the great weight on bars of iron, and solemnly, painfully,

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they mounted the long flight of steps. Behind them, alone and unattended, Miriam advanced. Her flower-like face, with its pathetic appeal, looked strangely young under its barbaric crown. The eyes of the priests gloated upon her as she passed between them, with the ferocious hunger of a band of wolves. And as she passed slowly up the temple steps, she gazed with despair into their leering, sensual faces, seeking in vain among them all for one glance of human pity, and shuddering, veiled her face.

At the doorway of the temple between the two guardian lions stood Hadar clad in the embroidered robes of the high priests, tall, obsequious, and menacing. As Miriam approached, he advanced to meet her and as the great idol was carried slowly past him on the shoulders of the priests, he fell upon his knees repeating solemn words of praise and worship. Then slowly amid the silence of the priests, the great god Bel was lifted to

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its pedestal of basalt, and the gilded head towered once more over the mighty hall of sacrifice. The King with his attendants entered, and took his place upon the throne which faced the idol, and with a great shout of welcome the priests fell on their knees before their god. Hadar rose and spoke aloud to Miriam.

“Advance, O Miriam, favoured among women, advance and greet thy bridegroom.” And taking her by the hand he led her to the foot of the idol, then unclasping the heavy embroidered robes she wore, he left her clad only in her white dress of floating gauze. Thus she stood, virginal, purely beautiful, at the foot of the gilded idol, victim of the brutal rites of Babylon’s idolatry. About her fell the floating shadow of her long black hair, veiling her beauty. No murmur escaped her lips; she stood there silently in the midst of the pitiless priests.

Towering high up in the centre of the hall of sacrifice rose the horned altar,

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richly carved, gilded and dripping with the wine of the oblations. A flight of marble steps led up to it, and upon them were strewn wreaths of lotus and nenuphar. Censers filled with frankincense and myrrh, sent a heavy smoke into the air. Up and down the steps went the priests, ministering at the altar. Bands of dancing women, flower-crowned and bearing tambourines at their girdles, advanced from behind the altar, their long black hair confined with floating veils of azure gauze. Among them came a band of brownlimbed youths, initiates of the temple clad in short-sleeved scarlet tunics and beating brazen cymbals. First, all knelt before the idol, and then with strange gestures and fantastic posturing, they began their frantic dances, wheeling, shouting, faster and faster, with a barbaric clamour from the smitten tambourines and cymbals.

Miriam turned her face towards the King who sat high above the madly whirl-

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ing throng. He was leaning carelessly back against the purple cushions, a smile curving his full lips, as he idly toyed with the royal signet which hung at his wrist. The smile deepened as he regarded her, his eyes shone with pleasure and his lips moved as if he said to her, "Fear not." Miriam remembered well that smile, and despairing looked away. Around and about her stood the statues of the gods of Babylon, assembled in the temple to do honour to Bel-Merodach, King of Kings. Their fantastic figures, half beast, half bird, towered towards the gilded ceiling and filled the shadowy spaces with the might of spreading wings. Above her towered the horned head of Bel, his agate eyes fixed in their circle of white enamel, seemed to gaze with an implacable vengeance upon the crowd of frantic worshippers beneath him. Miriam's gaze fastened itself, as if hypnotized upon the immovable cruel face. Around and about her the cries grew louder and louder, the

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dancing more frantic, madder. Now the priests were sacrificing at the altar, the groans of slaughtered animals mingled with the human clamour scarcely less animal, and the heavy intoxicating smoke of mingled myrrh and frankincense grew thicker and more suffocating. Far above her shone the gilded dome of the temple, obscured by the floating blue smoke of the incense, around her on the lofty walls fantastic creatures, half human, half brute, seemed to move and sway in a mad dance, horrible, and terrifying. She closed her eyes, her senses reeling with horror and overpowering fatigue, and as Hadar approached with a golden wine cup, hailing her as priestess, and called upon her to pour a libation to the god, fainting, she fell at the foot of the idol.

XII

It was mid-afternoon and Arrion, in an underground dungeon of the palace, raged impatiently in the darkness. From the grating in the heavy cedar door, he looked with despair upon the lazy Ethiopian sleeping without in the dim corridor. In the semi-obscurity of his dungeon he could only guess at the passage of the hours. When he had entered the palace enclosure, with the noise of the procession still sounding in his ears, he marked the hour upon the gnomon at the gate. Since then, in the silence and the deep shadows, no sound from the almost deserted palace told him of what was going on without. Wildly he reproached himself that he had yielded to the importunities of Miriam's mother.