

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

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.



BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

Deeply he regretted his rash appeal to the King, and thought long upon any method by which he could outwit the guard. Once without the subterranean passages of the prison he knew that the King's signet, the gift of Themistocles, would give him egress from the palace. He felt it under his tunic and its presence gave him hope. If he could only escape from the prison, and unmolested reach the northern gate, the keeper would surely let him pass. In the absence of the greater number of the palace servants, he was sure that no rumour would have reached him of the King's displeasure. But the guard! He was a gigantic Ethiopian; how could he hope to overpower him? In anguished accents, Arrion had poured forth his story. "Thou art a stranger in Babylon, thou shouldst pity me, a stranger also. Thou knowest the vileness of the priests; have compassion on me and let me go." So he argued and implored, but all in vain. To all

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

his wild words he received but one answer, "The guard who dared to disobey the King would lose his head." So, in darkness and in utter despair the heavy hours went by. Alone in the chill of his cell the unhappy Arrion trembled and shuddered. Sounds of footsteps in the corridors above his head began to pass more frequently, the attendants were returning to the palace, night was coming on. The guard stirred in his sleep. Arrion arose and looked again through the grating of his cell.

"I thirst," he said, "O Ethiopian, give me to drink." The guard arose, unlocked the heavy door, and bending to the gourd of water which hung without the cell, he stooped to lift it to his captive's lips, and at the same moment the slight and athletic youth tripped him so that he fell heavily, striking his head against the rough stone of the threshold. Arrion leaped over his prostrate body and in a twinkling fled past him into the dim cor-



*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

ridors of the prison, and disappeared into the darkness. Once escaped he quickly found his way out of the palace. The hours had flown by swiftly, long as they had seemed to Arrion, and the fateful day was nearly gone. Past the torches blazing in the porch of the palace he fled unperceived, and in the shadow of the walls, he made his way to the gates and passed undetected through the crowd of attendants and guests who were assembling for the feast which was to follow the day's procession. As he reached the streets the night descended, that tropic night which drops a curtain suddenly and silently over the broadly smiling day.

"At night, at night," he kept repeating to himself, "she will ascend the tower. It may not be too late." He had eaten nothing since the morning save a little coarse bread which had been given him in his cell, but as he sped along the darkening streets his feet seemed hardly to touch the pavement. "The King

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

feasts," he thought, "it will be many hours before he leaves the palace." His lips moved in broken words of prayer and thanksgiving that he had escaped in time to reach the temple ere the midnight hour. Street after street he passed, keeping in the shadow of the houses with their windowless dark walls. Flaming torches of bitumen blazed and spluttered at the intersection of the thoroughfares, which were filled with a crowd of people returning to their homes. Far away to the north and west as he turned his face towards the vast walls of the temple enclosure, he could see the sentinel lights twinkling among the stars which hung over the horizon.

At the temple gate the precious signet gave him passage. "I bear a message from the great King," he cried breathlessly to the frowning priests who stood beside the gate; at sight of the royal signet they opened the great bronze doors to let him pass. Along the marble pave-



*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

ment and up the steps Arrion fled, passing the servants of the temple, who were engaged in the service of the priests. Without, upon the broad lower terrace, the great brazen sea glittered in the light of the torches and dripped with the blood of the slaughtered bulls. Arrion stopped a moment in the shadow of one of the gigantic winged lions which guarded the door of the Du-aggara, and looking within, listened. At the altar and around the pedestal of the idol he saw an assemblage of priests feasting in shameless orgy upon the flesh of the sacrifices and the sacrificial wine. Everywhere in the great hall the priests lay at ease, their drunken forms lolling at length upon the altar steps, and upon the very throne of the King. Some leaned for support against the sacred sarcophagi of the deified kings and priests, which were placed along the walls. Some lay prone along the blood-stained floor; some danced and sang, mingling blasphemous words and incan-

*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

tations with their drunken shouts and songs. The censers still sent up their cloying fragrant smoke, the torches illumined with a lurid changing flame the bestial faces of the priests, the fantastic idols and the monsters on the lofty painted walls. Horror-stricken, Arrion looked upon the spectacle, gazing from the shadow among the hideous throng, for the sight of Miriam. He drew a deep breath of thankfulness. She was not there! He turned aside, and finding his way from shadow to shadow, began to mount the outer stairway of the temple. Up, up, he toiled, unwearied, his heart on fire with hope and fear. The strange figures of the carven beasts which lined the stairway loomed threateningly before him, serpents, uncoiled and menacing, stretched their hideous heads above him, winged bulls and lions, shadowy and terrifying, seemed to bar his passage. In the dim light of the stars their presence filled the mind of Arrion with monstrous



dreams and fancies. Bats flew round him in the shadows. Higher and higher, he toiled up the tremendous height, dizzy with anxiety and fatigue. Mighty Babylon with its vast walls and towering palaces lay far below him, with its torches and its blazing sentinel lights, and above him leaned the starry sky. The drunken shouts of the priests grew fainter, the great temple was silent, and Arrion was alone as it seemed, twixt earth and heaven.

Gradually the silence and the splendour of the night began to calm his distracted mind. Pausing at each stage of the temple for some sign or sound which would tell him of Miriam, he had heard nothing, seen nothing until he reached the sixth stage. The rooms in this part of the temple were dedicated to the use of the holy women and priestesses of Bel. He bent his ear to the heavy doors. Above them in the small window let into the wall he saw a trembling light, and heard the sound of gentle sobbing, subdued but con-

tinuous, half-drowned in the soft music of a harp, to which a melodious voice was singing in a strange and soothing rhythm. Arrion leaned closely to the door. He could not hear the words of the song, but he listened long, fearing to make his presence known or to give the alarm to her attendants, if such they were, who were striving to lull to sleep the sorrow of the unhappy girl. It was plain to him at last that it was Miriam, guarded by the women of the temple, and that, for the moment at least, she was safe. He turned reluctantly away, and finding his way to the last flight of steps which led to the upper shrine, he set his feet upon the stair. Dizzy and trembling, he scaled at last the topmost height and stood exhausted at the door of the shrine. He stooped and listened. All was silent, he pushed open the door and entered. The golden room was empty. At the four corners lights burned with a steady soundless fire on golden tripods filled with scented



BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

oil, their slim flames of blue and rose illumined with a tender changing radiance the sapphires and the rubies of the ceiling. A golden couch, immense, magnificent, set high on carven lions' feet, was spread luxuriously with dyed rugs and draperies of gold and scarlet. Opposite, a golden table equal in size and carved strangely with the spreading wings of eagles and with lions' heads, bore amid a mass of jewelled goblets three vessels for the gods. These gigantic vessels were filled to the brim with fragrant wine and upon the table in golden braziers, were heaped a priceless weight of frankincense and myrrh and cinnamon. At each end of the table tall and graceful censers stood ready to be lighted and in the centre was a bronze lamp of heavy and curious design. Near it lay a slender bar of iron, fashioned at its tip into the shape of a three-pronged thunder bolt, the mystic signet of Bel-Merodach.

Arrion's eyes dwelt upon it with shuddering terror, as he thought of the moment

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

when this heated iron should sink into the fair brow of Miriam. He approached the table, his feet sinking noiselessly among the lotus petals which strewed the floor. Should he take it, cast it from the temple tower? He dared not touch it. Its absence might alarm the priest, and arouse suspicion of his presence. How still it was in this sky chamber of the gods! The heavy draperies at the windows swayed gently in the cool night air.

He stepped from the silence of the golden room into the silence of the night upon the outer parapet. The sacred fire upon the summit of the shrine blazed with a mounting flame, illumining with a brilliant radiance the three great figures of Bel, of Ishtar and of Nana-Zarpanit, throning there together in the very vault of heaven. The young Jew gazed at these mighty symbols of the idolatry of Babylon with hatred and with awe. Bel, appearing as a warrior, brandished his spear in air; Ishtar, his goddess, was



BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

guarded by two lions and held serpents in her hands; and Nana-Zarpanit, queen also of the god and mistress of the sky, looked out upon the wide circle of the night, smiling mysteriously. She held in one hand her sceptre, symbol of sovereignty; and in the other a serpent, mystic sign of wisdom and eternity. Gigantic and splendid, the three raised their glittering heads among the stars. Arrion gazed upon this mighty dream of godhead and marvelled. Sleeplessness and fear and overpowering fatigue had loosed the cords of his spirit, and in this strange state of exaltation it was caught up in a cloud and as in a vision he saw the destruction of that mighty Babylon which lay glittering below him. He saw the passing of the oppressor and the vengeance which should descend upon the idolatrous city; he saw the overthrowing of this temple which towered to the stars; the destruction of the false gods of the Chaldeans, and he raised his hands on high and his

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

young voice, stern and prophetic, rang out in the silence of the night.

“O Babylon, thou art fallen! O golden city, thou shalt be desolate! Thou hast said . . . ‘I will ascend into heaven. I will exalt my throne above the clouds. I will be like the Most High.’ But, O Daughter of the Chaldeans: thou shalt pass away forever. Thou shalt be uninhabited from generation to generation. The wild beasts of the desert shall lie here; they shall cry in thy house; dragons shall howl in thy pleasant palaces. O ye false gods, ye shall fall. They bear them now on their shoulders; they bear them and set them in their places.—Fallen, fallen, thou shalt be fallen. O Priests! O King, the time is at hand.” Thus he stood upon the summit of the temple, alone, like a voice crying out to the stars, and time stood still and the winds of the night were his only companions. Slowly the stars rolled by in the moving vault of heaven. Slowly the lights began to move up the



*BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON*

great stairway of the temple. With a deep breath of thankfulness that the hour had come at last, Arrion entered the shrine and with hand on dagger he concealed himself behind the curtain and waited for the priests and Miriam.

XIII

At the moment when Arrion, staggering with fatigue, had set his foot upon the topmost shrine, Amytis in the palace lay alone upon the tumbled cushions of her couch. Curled up like a tigress she lay, her burning eyes shining with a sombre light from out the shadows of her darkened chamber. A single lamp of fragrant oil cast a flickering light upon the flushed face of the eunuch who slumbered heavily at the entrance. Save this one guard, Amytis had banished her attendants from her presence. The curtain which hung over the doorway swung slowly to and fro, the golden rosettes which weighted it clicked with a monotonous regularity upon the marble pavement. Without the air was nearly motionless even in the shad-