



*The Star
of Love*

*Florence
Morse
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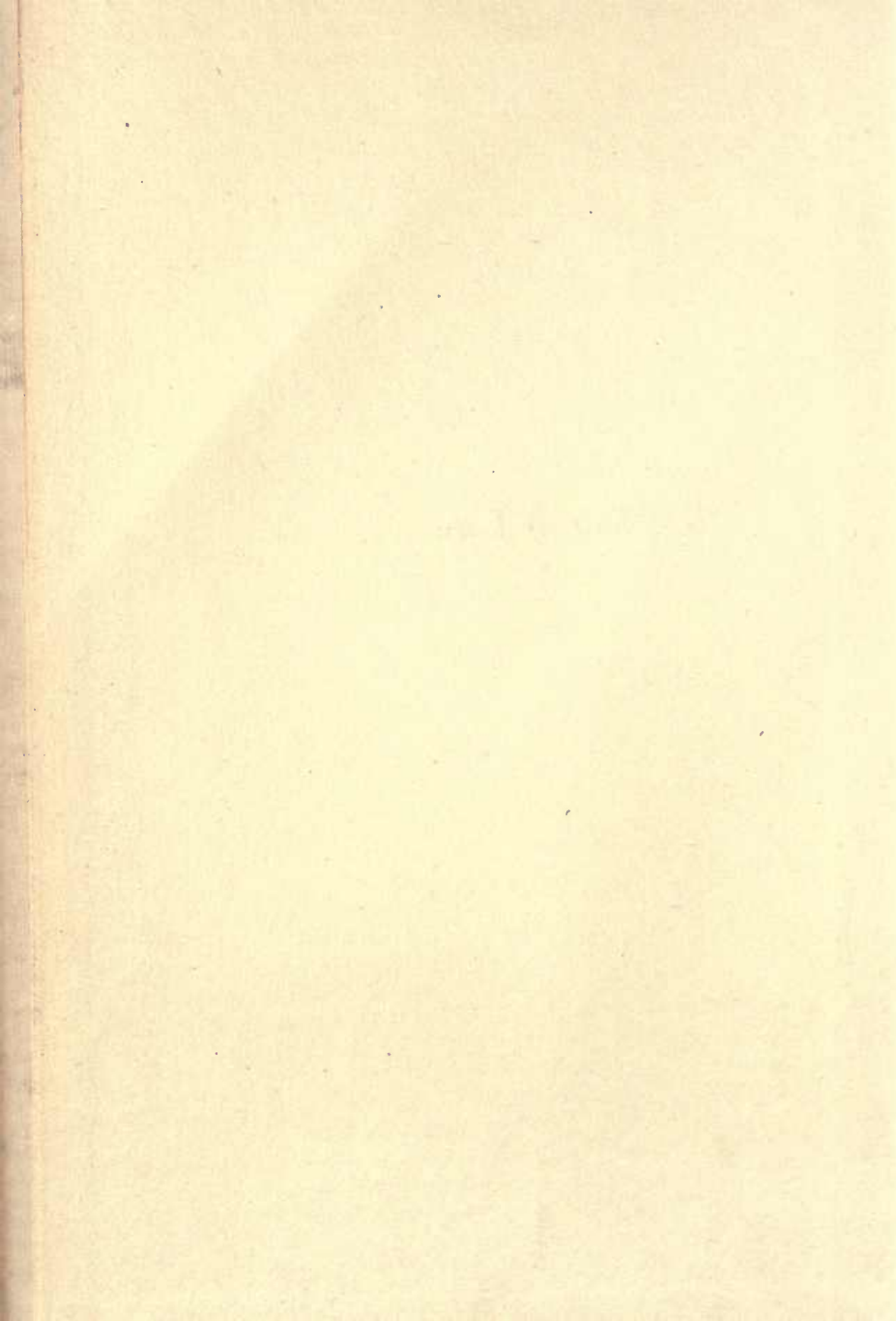


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The Star of Love



The Star of Love

By FLORENCE MORSE KINGSLEY

Author of "Titus, a Soldier of the Cross"



WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS IN
COLOR BY ARTHUR E. BECHER

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I



HE Queen Amestris, known also by her Median name of Vashti, was reposing herself from the fatigues incident to many court functions in the cool recesses of a marble hall open on its eastern side to a green embowered garden. She was quite alone in the great room, save for the black slave who stood behind her couch wielding a gilded fan of palm. Without on the vine-wreathed terrace a score of attendants waited the will of their royal mistress in discreet silence, while in an adjoining chamber her tire-women were setting forth the scent bottles of gold, studded with uncut jewels, the silver brushes and combs, the boxes of precious unguents, and the ewers of scented waters. A great mirror of burnished silver reflected these noiseless activities, as, also, the high carven chair where the queen would presently sit while her hair-dressers arranged her abundant tresses in the most elaborate of the

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many coiffures affected by the royal ladies of the court of Xerxes.

The drowsy quiet of the luxurious room was presently interrupted by an imperious voice from the terrace without and the low-voiced replies of the attendants.

Amestris languidly opened her eyes and frowned at the gilded ceiling above her head; she had given orders that in no case was she to be disturbed before sunset; but she well knew that there was one person in the palace before whose imperious will orders of any sort were useless. This person presently entered unannounced, pushing aside the heavy draperies of purple and gold with more than royal rudeness. She was an elderly woman of low stature, her small feet encased in elaborately embroidered shoes with high golden heels, which clicked energetically as she walked. Perhaps to keep herself from slipping on the marble stairs and floors, polished to an almost mirrorlike surface by the daily labor of innumerable slaves, she carried a tall staff of myrtle wood, curiously carved and tipped with a ball of glittering jade enwreathed with gold. Her dress was a closely fitting tunic of deep violet embroidered about the neck and sleeves with gold and pearls, and beneath this fell rich folds of figured silk which rustled about the small feet. The face of the woman beneath the high head-dress of gold-embroidered stuff bore the remains of great beauty, despite her age of well-nigh three score years, and her blue eyes beneath the faultlessly modeled brows were almost as beautiful and keen as in youth. But her abundant yellow hair, braided with precious stones, too obviously owed its rich color to the hands of the hair-dresser, while the brilliant red and white of her complexion, lavishly and skillfully applied as it was, quite failed to hide the cruel lines which the passing years had graven on the once fair and rounded contour of cheek and chin. Queen Atossa had enthralled three kings by the sheer wonder of her beauty, and now that beauty was

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vanished she ruled a fourth by the indomitable spirit which hid itself behind the faded exterior of her once exquisite body.

Amestris had not troubled herself to rise to her feet before the mother of her husband, as etiquette demanded, but she languidly motioned her to a seat on the opposite divan.

"I am really too fatigued for ceremony," she said somewhat peevishly, "and I was trying to sleep that I might be refreshed for the evening banquet with the king."

The older woman laughed the light musical laugh of her lost youth.

"So your slaves told me; but naturally they dared not refuse me admittance." The queen dowager spoke with the proud insolence which brooks no contradiction, her blue eyes dwelling the while upon the haughty face of the recumbent queen, an inscrutable smile lingering in their depths.

Amestris had been a very beautiful woman in the first bloom of her youth; but now, in her thirtieth year, she plainly showed the evil effects of the too luxurious life to which she had been accustomed from childhood. The exquisite lines of brow and nose had changed subtly into something less exquisite. The mouth, once fragrantly red like the passionate heart of a rose, had coarsened somewhat and become dull in tint. The haughty chin curved boldly into a heavy fold of flesh, whence it descended into the broad columnar throat with its encircling lines of a beauty over-ripe. The rounded arms and the magnificent bust and shoulders still gleamed white and wonderful through the folds of rose-colored tissue which half covered, half revealed them, and her small hand, with its slim, pointed fingers and oval nails like pink pearls, lay warmly white on the coverlid like some wondrous flower. If Atossa was a rose stripped of its glory of summer leaves, Amestris was assuredly a rose full blown and already at the point of fading.

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The queen mother continued to gaze at the graceful, indolent figure of her daughter-in-law, the smile in her eyes softening into a look which in another might have been construed into pity or contempt, or a subtle mingling of both; but the daughter of Cyrus had been too long complete mistress of herself and her emotions to allow her features to speak for her.

"'Tis a pity that you did not have the counsel of one wiser than yourself yesterday at this hour," observed Atossa at length, and by way of emphasizing her speech she tapped briskly upon the floor with the jade ball of her staff, which she habitually held planted before her after the manner of the Persian monarchs.

Amestris had permitted the thick curtain of her long lashes to fall over her dark eyes.

"It pleases the revered mother of the great king—may he live forever—to speak in riddles," she answered, without troubling to lift them.

"Has no one, then, told you what happened at the banquet yesterday?" demanded Atossa, her voice suddenly honied and soft as the distant cooing of doves.

Amestris opened her eyes and flashed a frightened look at the queen. When Atossa spoke in that tone it was time to be afraid; and of this the queen consort was quite as well aware as the meanest slave in the palace.

"I have heard nothing," she said, a shade of anxiety crossing her handsome face, "nothing, save that the king will set forth immediately on his Grecian campaign. All the satrapies will furnish troops, and the victory of the Persian arms is already well assured."

Atossa laughed musically, quite as musically as in the old days when she had led kings and princes captive by the magic of her charms.

"I condole with you—Princess," she said, dropping her words slowly, as though the better to observe their blight-

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ing effect; "you have faded early—too early. You know I warned you years ago against many sweetmeats, and the constant sipping of sherbets."

"What do you mean? And why call me Princess, who am reigning queen, and queen alone?" demanded Amestris, rising and looking down angrily upon the shrunken figure of the woman at her feet.

Seen thus, her tall majestic form drawn to its full height, Amestris looked every inch the queen she had declared herself.

"If you may no longer be called queen and consort, you have only yourself to thank for it," said Atossa, quite unmoved. "But I must go; I meet my son, the king, at supper to-night. Doubtless he wishes to advise with me."

She arose and drew her mantle of the royal violet and white about her shoulders with elaborate care.

"It is suffocatingly hot in here," she drawled, "but a cool wind from the mountains has sprung up; you would do well to direct your slaves to draw the curtains and allow it to enter."

Amestris had grown pale to the lips; she advanced almost timidly and laid her hand on Atossa's mantle, as if to detain her against her will.

"It still pleases the great queen to speak in riddles," she said; "but I am dull to-day from lack of sleep, perchance——"

"You were always dull, Amestris," the queen mother said with cutting emphasis. "I knew it right well when I married you to my son; but you were healthy and handsome, and Xerxes was only a princeling in those days. I had determined, it is true, that he should sit on the throne of his father, Darius, and of the great Cyrus, my father; for he alone of all the princes was of the blood royal, unpolluted by any commoner strain."

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"I also am royal," interrupted Amestris, with a return of her queenly hauteur.

"Not altogether," said Atossa. "Your father was the brother of Darius, it is true, but his mother was a slave. Still, you were of the royal house, and I chose you for my son."

She paused and looked piercingly into the pallid face of the queen. "You have borne Xerxes three sons," she went on with merciless distinctness, "and so far you have done well; one of those sons shall one day sit on the throne of his father. But you, daughter of Otanes, are no longer his queen. The decree has already gone forth, the decree of the Medes and Persians which cannot be altered."

Amestris staggered back as though she had received a mortal blow. "You—you are mad! I do not believe you!"

"Why did you not come to the banquet yesterday when the great King Xerxes, my son—may he live forever!—sent for you and commanded you to appear in his presence?"

"Yesterday—" faltered Amestris, pressing her hand to her head as though in mortal pain. "Why, yesterday, I myself entertained the wives of the princes and their honorable women at a banquet in my garden here, as you yourself know. The king had commanded me so to do, and I obeyed. The Queen Atossa did not honor me with her presence, it is true, though I had desired it."

"I dined in the great Hall of Columns, sitting at the right hand of my son, as is my divine right," answered Atossa proudly. "I care not for women, and a banquet where no men are present is a weariness to the flesh. But the king sent for you; in my hearing he dispatched Aspamitres with a message bidding you present yourself before the king's majesty without delay. But you did not see fit to obey."

"How could I leave my guests?" faltered Amestris. "It would have been a gross insult. The Princess of Media

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was on my right hand and the wife of Meres, who is a Princess of Thebes of the blood royal, on my left. It was impossible, I tell you. Besides, I was not attired in my robes of royal state, without which I could not appear in the presence of the king. To have gone to the hands of my tire-woman would have consumed an hour or more; it would then have been too late."

Atossa laughed, a harsh, cruel laugh this time, which lashed the other like the blow of a whip.

"You are wondrous fertile in excuses now that it is indeed too late," she said. "I beg of you, do not exhaust your breath in rehearsing them to me."

"But I—I sent a writing to the king by the hand of Aspamitres, explaining the matter," Amestris went on, her voice trembling more and more. "I begged Xerxes to do me the favor to excuse me until somewhat later, when it would be possible for me to come to him without offending my guests. I entreated him to send me word of his royal will in the matter. Then I——"

"You already knew his royal will," Atossa interrupted coldly. "The word had gone forth, the word of a Persian king, and you chose to spurn his command, to flout his divine majesty to his face like an ignorant shepherdess. Not alone did you affront the supreme royalty, but all the assembled princes of Media and Persia, who were cognizant of the matter."

"But my writing was to the king alone. As a wife to her husband I wrote, and I directed the eunuch Aspamitres to give it into the hand of Xerxes and to no other. He would have understood. He is ever most kind and considerate."

"Too kind and too considerate," mocked Atossa. "And you, unseeing fool that you are, have grown ever bolder and more presuming in your treatment of the king, with that familiarity which breeds contempt, as an overripe pome-

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granate produces within itself the maggot which destroys it. So have you destroyed yourself, Princess, and I cannot find it in my heart to pity you overmuch. Farewell! I came only to break the news to you somewhat more gently. The king's decree in the matter, which has already been written by the hand of his scribes, will reach you in good time."

Amestris sank back half fainting on her couch as Atossa passed out, and her frightened women crowded about her, with bottles of scent and restoratives. Atossa's voice had not been loud, yet the quick ears of the attendants had heard most of the conversation, and consternation had fallen upon them one and all like an untimely frost on a bed of bright flowers. As the personal attendants of Amestris, they had enjoyed special privileges and emoluments which might now be taken from them. They looked at one another with distraught glances full of a growing fear. It might well be that the fainting queen would shortly be visited by the palace executioner. Such grim proceedings were not altogether unknown at Shushan, where swift poison or the silent bowstring were the convenient mediums by which superfluous or inconvenient persons were summarily caused to vanish from the stage of gay court life. One by one on noiseless feet the women vanished from the great chamber, while the stricken queen lay moaning among the purple and golden pillows of her couch, her dress disordered, her rich hair hanging in heavy masses to the floor. At last only the black fan girl remained, standing like a statue of ebony behind the couch, her great gilded palm leaf swaying back and forth in the perfumed air with rhythmic regularity.





II



T was already early in the day, yet the great northern approach to the palace of Xerxes presented a brilliant scene of bustle and activity; on the double flight of grand sculptured staircases, which connected the city of Shushan with the terraced platform which dominated both city and plain like a vast and beautiful throne, a constant procession of people came and went in a parti-colored, glittering stream; nobles, slaves, citizens, soldiers, and officers of the guard, the latter riding their well-trained horses directly up the wide marble stair, constructed with a view to this very end. The portico itself, its lofty roof supported upon eight magnificent columns, was in effect a hall of audience and a summer throne room, since it stood open to all the winds of heaven, save for the marvelous hangings of white, green, and blue fastened with cords of the royal white and violet, which conveniently shielded it from too ardent incursions of the brilliant light of the cloudless spring sky. In and out under the carved

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capitals swallows flitted, cleaving the bright air like swift arrows sped from an unseen bow, while the cool marble pavements far beneath resounded to the subdued ring of armor and the sound of innumerable feet coming and going between the columns upon every side. In the midst of this vast columnar hall, the burning cynosure of every eye, sat the monarch himself upon a raised daïs which commanded a view not only of the varied groups of courtiers, who appeared to gather and dissolve beneath his eye like the gayly colored figures of a kaleidoscope, but of the fertile plains of Shushan stretching away like a liliated carpet to the mountains of Lauristan, rising dim and cold in the purple of their distant majesty.

The earlier business of the day had consisted chiefly in receiving the official reports of the various princes and satraps who were about to accompany Xerxes upon the long-contemplated expedition into Greece. The son of Darius had begun his rule over the hundred and seven and twenty provinces wrested from the grasp of weaker potentates by the doughty enterprises of Cyrus, Cambyses and the no less valiant Darius, by the notable putting down of an insurrection in Egypt, and the quelling of minor revolts in less distant dependencies. Having done all this, and being now at such terms of peace with the world as promised a period of luxurious inaction, Xerxes had opposed, as vigorously as a rather facile and yielding temper would permit, the hazardous campaign to which he now found himself, the resources of his kingdom, and his honor pledged. Just how the easy-going monarch had traveled thus far on the road of an ambition not his own he could hardly have told; his advisers undoubtedly had interests at heart directly opposed to his own more peaceful inclinations, and they skillfully worked upon the imagination of the king, causing to appear there such pictures of further glory and aggrandizement as they chose for him, somewhat after the fashion of the cun-

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ning jugglers and magicians who amused the court in its idle hours.

Certain it was that Mardonius, uncle of the king by marriage, and lamentably defeated in Thrace a decade ago, burned to retrieve his military reputation, expecting for himself the rich prize of conquered Greece. Certain refugee princes of Athens, resident for some years in the Persian court, hoped to be established as dependent despots in their native city, where they promised themselves glorious orgies of revenge upon their enemies. Demoratus, the Spartan, concealed similar ambitions under a show of loyal devotion to the Persian monarch, whose creature he had become; while the vast number of Persian and Median nobles, soldiers, sycophants, and hangers-on, accustomed to war and subsisting chiefly on the fat spoils of battle, looked forward with impatience to an expedition promising glory, plunder, and captives innumerable, both male and female, upon whom they would work the will of the conqueror upon the conquered.

So it had come to pass in this the third year of his reign that the great King Xerxes was about to undertake a task, the magnitude and difficulty of which he scarcely yet realized. For more than six months the work had been going on in all parts of his dominions, and on this day the final results were being summed up; reports given of work previously ordered, and letters and edicts prepared by the learned scribes who sat near the throne, armed with the ink-horns, parchments, and pens of their profession. These numerous letters, reports, and edicts must be translated into the more than seventy languages spoken in the various provinces. When finished they were read aloud in the king's hearing and stamped by his seal-bearer with the royal seal; thereupon they were given to the hand of couriers, riding night and day on the king's business on horses swifter than the wind.

Xerxes had now listened to many detailed reports re-

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lating to vast levies of troops and their equipment; orders for hundreds of triremes and thousands of vessels of inferior sorts to be furnished by the maritime states. Magazines of corn, he was informed, had been built and stocked at various places along the line of march. The great bridge of boats over the Hellespont, superior in solidity and strength to any bridge of the sort ever attempted, a veritable high road, over which troops, infantry and cavalry, baggage and supplies might be transported with perfect safety, was reported well-nigh completed; gangs of laborers relieving one another night and day, under supervision of competent engineers and a division of troops commanded by Meres, one of the seven hereditary princes. The grandeur of the forthcoming campaign and the almost infinite extent of his resources had been unfolded and spread out before the youthful monarch with a fulsomeness of phrase and a tedious repetition of his own divine prerogatives, which as the hours passed became almost nauseating in their effect upon the man.

In person, Xerxes, like his father Darius before him, was dark, both as to complexion, hair, and beard; but under his black brows and lashes there gleamed unexpectedly a pair of deep blue eyes inherited from his mother, the fair Atossa. Unlike the proud, scornful regard of the militant daughter of Cyrus, these eyes of the royal despot were singularly soft and sparkling. His ready smile revealed rows of perfect teeth in the depths of his beard, which he wore trimmed and curled in close soldier fashion. Xerxes would have been called a handsome man anywhere; in the language of his courtiers he was the divine one, the lightning of whose glance could make alive, though it had slain; the beauty of whose brow rivaled the grandeur of the mountains; whose breath was sweeter than the perfume of roses, even though they were roses of Shiraz; whose thighs and shoulders were mightier than the foundations of the earth;

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and whose will was inflexible like the will of Auramazda, the All-Wise God. He was King of Kings; the Lord of the whole Earth—invincible, inflexible, all glorious! Yet Xerxes yawned wearily and very like a common man behind his broad, brown hand, even while the acclamations, in which every soul of all the hundreds in his presence joined, rang through the great carved rafters, till the vast columns hewn from the colored Ægean marbles, appeared to rock on their carven bases.

While the tumult was loudest the king grasped the arms of his chair as if to rise, the signal for terminating the audience. A man who stood at the left of the monarch, with watchful eyes upon his every movement, bent forward and whispered a word in his ear.

“Another edict still?” muttered Xerxes, mouthing his words as if disgusted with them. “Let the scribes dispatch it then; I will do no more to-day. Nay, were I immortal as Auramazda I should weary of the ceaseless stream of affairs. Bid Aspamitres and Bighthana attend me, and do you, Haman, follow me to the garden. Even a god must eat and drink, and, by Bel and Nabon, I am parched as the desert and empty as a beggar’s purse!”

The man addressed as Haman glanced dubiously at the scroll which an attendant had just thrust into his hand, then he beckoned to one of the scribes to follow, as he in his turn joined the train of his royal master.

The scribe in question was a tall, grave man apparently well past middle age, his untrimmed beard and certain peculiarities of his dress setting him apart from the company of scribes from whom he had just been singled out.

“You heard what our royal master said with regard to the edict pertaining to the queen?” asked Haman in a half whisper. “You have only to affix the royal seal and dispatch it to the various provinces.”

“Nay, but the Great King—may he prosper exceedingly

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—has not yet heard the writing of the decree. I must read it in his presence, according to the law; else I cannot send it.”

“You are too particular as to the law, Matacas. The king is the law. He has passed his royal word to divorce the queen; and it only remains to finish the business, as he commanded.”

The scribe looked troubled.

“The king knew not what edict it was. Perchance he will repent himself of an act done in haste. The queen is the wife of his youth and the mother of his sons. She is a great princess, moreover, and of the blood royal.”

Haman fixed the scribe with a lightning glance of displeasure.

“Who are you, Jew, to instruct me, a noble of Persia? Hold your craven tongue and follow in silence. I will see to it that the royal seal is affixed in the presence without delay.”

Xerxes, lolling at his ease in a latticed marble pavilion, where his cupbearers poured for him the exquisite wines of Shiraz and Ecbatana into golden goblets cooled with snow, glanced up with a laugh of relief and pleasure as Haman again obtruded his brilliant presence within the range of the royal vision.

“Drink, Haman,” he bade the courtier, “and forget care!”

“But the edict, Great King, which requires only the affixing of the royal seal to become a law.”

“What edict have I issued of late which requires this unseemly haste?” demanded the king impatiently. “Cannot I refresh myself for an hour in my garden without an edict being thrust into my face? Take it away!”

“May the king’s excellent majesty pardon his servant; but I act under the king’s express command of yesterday.”

Xerxes raised his hand meditatively to his beard.

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“Yesterday—yesterday? Why, yesterday I feasted the princes. There was no state-craft mixed with the victuals of the king’s table; no royal commandments issued, save as to the wine and the disposition of the garlands.”

“The King’s Majesty cannot have forgotten the refusal of the Queen’s Majesty to appear at the banquet, and the decree that went forth from the all-wise tongue of the king,” faltered the courtier, paling a little before the blue lightning of the king’s gaze, yet secure in the knowledge of the unalterable nature of the writing, which had already been made by the most skilled of all the king’s learned scribes.

“You are talking foolishness, Haman; I remember nothing of what you say; yet—” The king paused and passed his hand across his eyes as if to brush from them some hindering substance. “Why, the queen was present at the banquet, and sat at my side,” he exclaimed.

“The Queen Atossa, exalted mother of the divine Majesty, sat at your right hand.” The courtier’s voice was low and smooth. He knew well that the king’s senses had been muddled with wine when the unalterable words had issued from his lips, and also that his hasty decision had not emanated from his own mind, but, as too frequently happened, from the wily suggestion of Atossa herself, and of Memucan, a powerful prince of Media, who secretly hated the reigning queen.

“The queen mother—yes; I remember now; but my wife, my Amestris, was not there. I remember that I missed her. But— Why in the name of Auramazda do you all stare at me so? Read what you have written, Matacas; I see you are waiting, your hooked nose smelling the parchments, like a bird of ill omen.”

The scribe gravely unrolled the parchment which he held in his hand and proceeded to read to the king, in full form and in the language of the decree unalterable, after the manner of the Medes and Persians, the royal edict

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against Vashti Amestris, one time royal consort of Xerxes, the King of Media and Persia and of the one hundred and seven and twenty provinces, the names whereof were set down in due order; to the effect that since Vashti Amestris, the Queen's Majesty, had refused to obey the direct command of the king, she was hereby set aside and divorced forever. There followed also the kingly command that all wives and maidens in all the excellent dominions and kingdoms of Xerxes should hereby take warning to observe and do as they were bidden by those men who had rule over them, lest a similar evil fate overtake them.

As the scribe's sonorous voice intoned the formal words of the writing, which he had himself transcribed from the unthinking words of Xerxes, words cunningly suggested to him by Memucan, chief enemy of the queen, Xerxes turned exceeding pale, and his blue eyes blazed fiercely under the penthouse of his black brows.

"'Tis a conspiracy," he said hoarsely, "a foul conspiracy against the queen, and against myself, in that the queen is well beloved by me, and I would not willingly do her harm." His head sank forward on his breast, while unwilling Memory held her torch over the events of the previous day. He began to realize, albeit vaguely, the unhappy circumstances which had caused this terrible writing. Some one—it might have been Memucan—had spoken softly of the queen in his ear. She was the most beautiful, the voice had said purringly, of all women in the world; and he had assented with a shout of approval. Like the lilies of Shushan for perfection, like the snows of Lauristan for purity, and like the throne of the King's Majesty for splendor. Again and yet again his cup bearers had filled the gem-encrusted goblet, and he had drunk deeply of both wine and flattery, till a great foolish longing had come upon him to display the superlative charms of his queen before the eyes of the assembled princes and potentates. He had pictured

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her in all the majesty of her beauty and the magnificence of her royal apparel, gleaming with the pearls and jewels which he had himself chosen for her. And forgetting all else save his fatuous pride in his queen, he had dispatched his chamberlains to fetch her.

She had not come. Aspamitres had prostrated himself in the royal presence as one overcome with fear, and delivered the queen's reply. "The Queen's Majesty," he said, "sends greeting to Xerxes, King of Media and Persia, and regrets that she cannot accede to his request, inasmuch as the etiquette prescribed by the King's Excellent Majesty forbids the presence of honorable women at banquets like the one at which the king is set down."

At this the queen mother, who sat glittering with jewels like an idol and quite unabashed at her son's right hand, blazed with ill-concealed fury.

"Honorable women, indeed!" she exclaimed. "What then am I, daughter, wife, and mother of kings? The queen has cast a base insult at me, Atossa, daughter of the Great Cyrus, founder of the Persian dynasty; and to you, O King, I submit the matter. Shall this descendant of a slave defy your Excellent Majesty to the face? Shall she cast aspersions upon the mother of the Divine One? Auramazda and all the gods forbid!"

And the seven hereditary princes who sat at the king's table applauded these words to the echo; and Memucan, who, because of his semi-royal birth, sat at the king's left, whispered in the king's ear that she was not worthy who had done this thing, since certain of the foreign princes were even now laughing secretly, because the King of Kings had been flouted to his face by a woman.

The words had enraged Xerxes beyond measure, he remembered it all now; and he had shrieked out that no one should defy his authority or insult his majesty. He had turned in his rage to the men who watched the scene from

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under drooping lids as those who know not whither the event will turn under their eyes.

“What shall be done to this woman, according to the law, because she has disobeyed me, and defied me to my face in this, my own palace?”

At first no one durst raise his voice against the queen, because every man of them knew that in his sober hours Xerxes was as wax in the hands of his women. And they waited for Atossa to speak first.

Atossa read their dubious glances aright. She had drunken much wine; but it had not made her merry at heart as the king had been but an hour since; only bitterness and wrath lurked in the cup. The great queen saw herself second who had always been first, and for the moment she hated Amestris with all the sullen fury of her nature. The cunningly devised insult of Aspamitres's words, which were indeed true, but which it chanced Amestris had not uttered, were as oil upon the flame of her wrath. The scroll, which Amestris had intended for the hand of her husband, Aspamitres gave to Memucan, who glanced at it slyly, then crumpled it in the palm of his hand.

“Let Amestris be no longer queen,” Atossa said, in a high, strident voice which reached the ear of the most distant reveler. “Let her be strangled!”

Memucan seized upon the words of the queen, and himself spoke to the king, with grave assumption of prudence and forbearance, yet as one who plainly foresaw unseen evils gathering in the train of the queen consort's rash action.

“May the Divine One live forever,” he said, “and may his wisdom be that of Auramazda, as is his excellent glory; but the queen hath wronged not the king only, but all the princes and all the people of all the provinces of the King's Majesty. For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their hus-

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bands and them that have rule over them, when it shall be reported that the great King Xerxes commanded his queen to appear before him, but she came not. Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Then shall arise too much contempt and wrath. If it please the king let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Medes and Persians, that it cannot be altered, that Vashti, who is also called Amestris, come no more before the king. And let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she. And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire—an empire which is bounded only by the ends of the earth—all wives shall give to their husbands honor, both to great and small. Then shall great glory redound to the King's Majesty, and all the men of the earth shall bow before him in praise and gratitude."

These words of the astute Memucan floated before the king's mind like phrases muttered in a dream. Like a dream, also, was the memory of the great shout of approval which shook the rafters of the banqueting hall. But had he spoken the fatal words of the decree? He could not remember.

Suddenly he dropped his hands from his eyes, and no one present ever forgot his face of anguish. He spoke directly to the scribe.

"Matacas," he said hoarsely, "tell me the truth, as thou art a Hebrew of the Hebrews and dost believe in thy invisible god, Jehovah; did I put away my wife Amestris because she refused to come to the banquet at my command?"

The Jew looked at the ashen face of the king and a great pity was in his heart.

"May the King live forever," he began mechanically.

But Xerxes interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

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“Forget empty ceremony for the moment,” he said, with a frown of anger. “I asked the question of you, Matacas, because you were present. I saw you. You do not drink wine as we Persians drink it. I ask you for the truth—as man to man.”

The scribe bowed his head.

“The King spoke the words even as I have read them in his presence,” he said regretfully.

Xerxes groaned aloud.

“Then it is done, and no one, not even I, who am King of Potentates, can undo it!”

He clenched his great hand, and the muscles of his arm swelled visibly within the band of red gold that encircled it. Matacas, the Hebrew scribe, whose hand had dealt the final blow, stood like a statue of bronze in his place, bearing the fateful parchment; in the background Haman, licking his lips with the furtive satisfaction of a sleek animal, awaited the issue with unconcealed eagerness; while the meaner attendants and slaves durst not raise their eyes to the stern figure that dominated them all.

In the midst of a silence which could be felt there came a rush of feet at the door without, and a woman's voice upraised in passionate entreaty.

“Let me pass! I care not if my life is forfeit. I must—I will see the king!”

Xerxes started; then a swift flush sprang to his dark face. He strode to the door and thrust aside the crossed spears with which the guards had barred the way. The tall figure of a woman, pallid and disheveled, staggered past them, gazed wildly at the amazed and curious faces for an instant, then dropped moaning at the feet of the king.

“Xerxes—oh, my husband, listen to me, I entreat thee! Nay, slay me if thou wilt! I cannot—I cannot bear it longer!” And the anguished voice broke into a loud sobbing wail of inarticulate grief.

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Xerxes stooped. "Amestris," he whispered raising the woman tenderly in his arms. "My Amestris!"

Then he turned with a snarl of rage upon the watchful group.

"Out of my sight—all of you! I would be alone with my—wife."





III



IN the courtyard of a modest house near the eastern gate of the city of Shushan a maiden stood feeding her doves. From the red-tiled roof overhead, and from the gnarled boughs of the ancient olive tree that cast the deep shadow of its silver leaves upon the pavement came the pretty creatures with eager swoop and flutter, crowding about her feet with outstretched necks and a peculiar winnowing sound of their broad pinions. The girl allowed the yellow grain to trickle slowly through her slim brown fingers, laughing the while at the antics of a couple of iridescent beauties bolder than the others, who ventured to snatch the food from her very hand.

“There, there! my little ones; it is enough!” she cried, clapping her hands over the empty bowl. “See! There is no more, and you are not hungry, only greedy; you shall drink first, then fly away.”

She pushed back the cover from the stone cistern, drew out a brown jugful and poured it slowly into a broad

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basin of polished copper; then stood aside to watch the thirsty creatures as they plunged their pretty heads deep into the cool water. A flock of chattering sparrows had gathered and were hopping nimbly about picking the fragments left from the pigeons' hasty meal from between the stones. The girl glanced at them thoughtfully, her red lips parting in a half smile.

As she stood thus, leaning upon the cistern watching the almoners of her lavish bounty, she looked little more than a child. Albeit her kirtle of blue and white fell about her tall, slender figure down to the small sandaled feet, while a womanly veil of darker stuff drawn over her head half hid the heavy waves of rich, dark hair. Her face, a slender oval, gleamed white under the dark mantle—yet was it white with a rich undertone of rosy olive, the cheeks flushing with a warmer color which paled and deepened with the generous tides of life beneath. Her features were straight and noble, her mouth red and passionate as the mouth of a woman, yet the dark eyes beneath the thick curtain of curling lashes still wore the soft wondering look of a young child, who gazes at the world half pleased, half affrighted, from the safe shelter of its mother's arms.

A young man wearing the gleaming armor and winged crest which distinguished the guardsmen of the king entered the cool retreat softly, and paused irresolute as if loath to disturb the utter peace and innocence of the maiden's reverie. But she heard his step and turned her head with a flashing smile which woke up a myriad of charming curves and dimples and made of her more a child than ever.

"After all your promises, Nathan, you are too late to see the pigeons feed," she said reproachfully. "I waited and waited till the poor darlings were ready to devour the very stones for hunger. And so you see I had to feed them, though I did want you to see them eat from my hand."

"It was impossible for me to get off duty before, Ha-

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dassah," said the man, advancing into the brilliantly lighted space by the cistern. "I thought of you, dear, and longed to be here."

The girl looked up at the handsome, dark face under the gilded helmet with a little cry of surprise and pleasure.

"What beautiful, dazzling bright armor!" she cried, "and, oh, those outspread wings in the front of your cap! they are almost like the wings of my prettiest dove; and, Nathan, is that the king?" Her child's voice sank to a reverent murmur, as she touched with one slim finger the bronze figure of a man between the wings.

"Yes, little one; that small image represents the King's Majesty, and the wings are the token of his power, a power which in the language of the court overspreads the earth from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof. Nevertheless, we must needs make war." The young man drew his black brows together half angrily as he doffed his pointed helmet, for the heat in the street without was great and he had come in haste through the city. "May I entreat you for a draught of water, dear Hadassah?"

The girl clapped her hands.

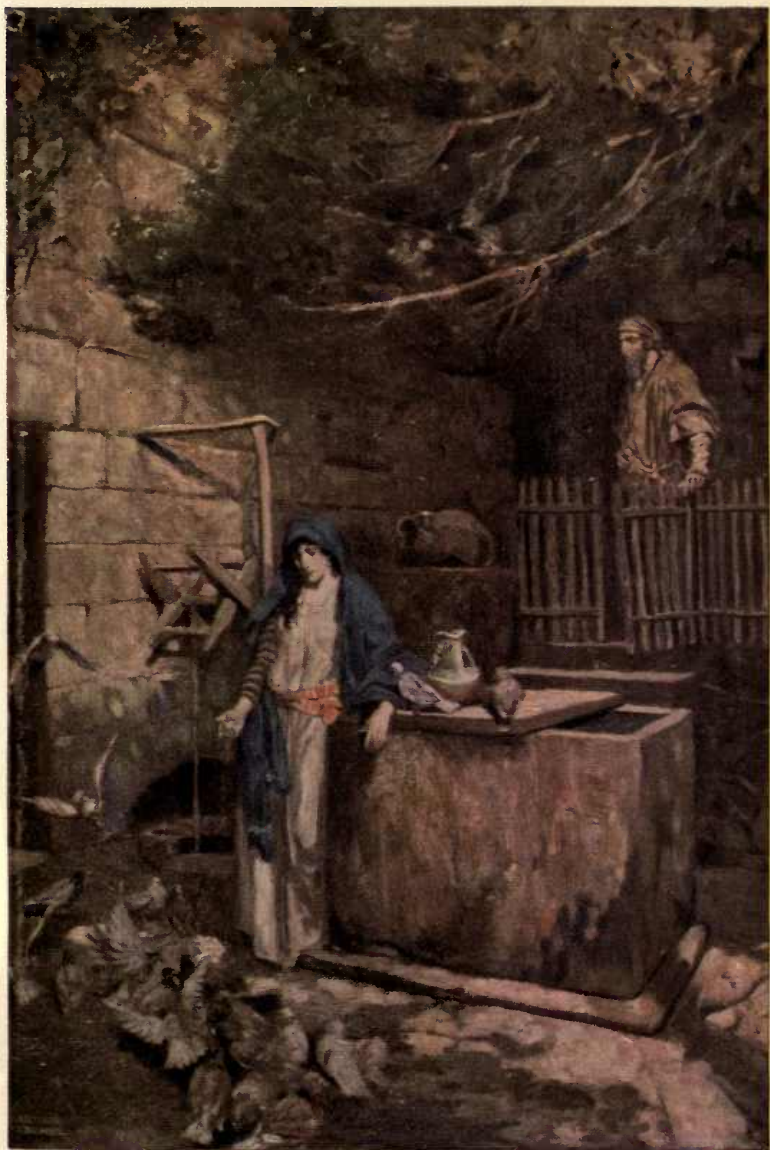
"I have something better than that," she cried. "Guess what it is!"

She approached her brilliant child's face nearer the man, and for the life of him he could not resist the innocent freshness of the smiling lips, but touched them lightly with his own.

The girl shook her head and drew back.

"You ought not to do that, Nathan," she said gravely. "We are not yet—betrothed." She blushed deliciously as she hesitated over the last word.

"But I love you, Hadassah; and you, dearest and loveliest of women, love me; have you not said so, sweet?" His tone breathed a subtle anxiety mingled with the passion of young love.



“THE GIRL ALLOWED THE YELLOW GRAIN TO TRICKLE SLOWLY THROUGH HER SLIM, BROWN FINGERS.”

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The dark maiden looked up at him, and her child's eyes were clear and deep as pools of water under the midnight sky.

"Indeed I do love you, Nathan," she said earnestly. "And I love Mordecai, too; for he is ever the best and dearest of fathers to me who have neither father nor mother; and I love my pigeons also, and these little brown birds who glance at me with such bright, wild eyes."

The mischievous dimples had begun to come and go in her soft cheeks, and she lowered her long, dark lashes, as she saw a swift frown gather between the brows of her lover. "Now you are angry, Nathan; for you look black and fierce as an eagle about to pounce on one of my white pigeons; but why? And why should you scowl at me? Am I not right to love Mordecai, and Abihail—nay, I love her not over-much. She scolds me too often, and her voice it grates like the noise of the stones when the corn is growing fine."

"But, Hadassah, beloved, I do not love you as Mordecai loves you, nor as Abihail loves you, nor yet as these pretty pigeons, who gather daily to feed of your bounty."

"Oh, do you not? Tell me then; how do you love me, Nathan?"

"I have told you many times, child; but you——"

"Tell me again. I am so forgetful. Ah, you cannot guess how forgetful I am! That is why Abihail scolds me so often with her voice that grates like the millstones."

The young man possessed himself of one of the little hands which he pressed fervently to his lips.

"I will tell you again, dearest and best-beloved of my soul; and yet again and again, for it is sweeter than honey out of the rocks—this love of mine for thee."

"Yes?" smiled the maiden, "then tell me just how you love me, and I—will listen and try—oh, so hard, to remember."

"I love thee, beloved, as the sun loveth the earth when

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he stoops to it in his majesty, and the earth at his kiss bursts into bloom and fruitage; I love thee as the thirsty deer loves the cool water of the mountain stream, when all day he hath been hard driven by the hunter; I love thee as the mother loveth the babe that nestles at her breast, for so art thou, fair and helpless and tender. I love thee as the great sea loveth the little stream that fain would lose itself in its bosom. I love thee as the nightingale loveth the rose-thicket, where he sings all night to the moon and poureth out his heart to the night. With all my man's strength I love thee; with my height; my depth; my innermost being."

Hadassah burst into a joyous ringing laugh as her lover's impassioned voice sank into silence.

"Nay, but I cannot remember all the ways in which you love me, there are so many of them; but I will try. You shall hear me at my lesson."

She held up one delicate child's hand with its pink-tipped pointed fingers, and began to count upon it with the forefinger of the other hand.

"Listen, now, and tell me if I forget, Nathan. First, you love me like the sun; and second, you love me like—yes, now I remember, like the thirsty deer. That is a queer way to love; is it not? Then, you love me like—like—no; do not tell me; I wish to think of it all myself. You love me like—Nay; I cannot remember."

"You must needs remember, child, for I am going away and cannot hear you at your lesson many times more," said Nathan, smiling at her pretty play with thumb and fingers. He bent to kiss the pretty hand which quivered like a captive bird in his clasp. "I am going with the king into Greece."

"With the king—into Greece? Oh, Nathan, why—why are you going? I shall be so dull with no one but the doves and Abihail, for, as thou knowest, Mordecai comes

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home but seldom. He is always at the palace, writing, writing all day long. Oh, I cannot bear to have you go. If you love me as the nightingale loveth the rose—see; I have remembered—why not stay with me always?”

The man's arm stole softly about the slender waist.

“Hadassah,” he said hoarsely, “I would that I could make thee my wife now, at once; but, poor, dependent upon the king's bounty, albeit a prince of Judah, what can I do? I must even go to the war and do what I may to earn glory and reward. I shall be near the king's person as one of his bodyguard. Who knoweth whether Jehovah will not prosper me, even as he prospered the great prophet Daniel in the days of the wresting of Babylon out of the hands of the Assyrian? I will come back, beloved, and thou shalt be mine in the day of my return. I will demand the promise of Mordecai, thy kinsman. He cannot refuse.”

“But you will go—you will be far away and I—shall be here—alone,” sighed the girl. “Oh, Nathan, you cannot think how dull it is, and how tiresome is the everlasting making of cakes with corn and honey, and I cannot shape them as Abihail does, try as I may! And yesterday I let them all burn on the stones while I was thinking of many things. If only I could go to the palace sometimes, and see the processions and hear the music.”

“May Jehovah forefend!” muttered the prince. “Nay, child, do not wish for the palace. It is not a good place for maidens.”

“That is what Mordecai is always saying,” pouted the girl. “And he will not even tell me of the beautiful ladies overmuch, nor of how they braid their hair, nor of the ornaments they put on; and I should so like to know! He says he does not remember if they loop the braids at the side—so, or leave them loose. Do you know, Nathan?”

“Nay, child; I do not often see the women of the royal house. And I would not if I could. My duties——”

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"Then you have seen them?" interrupted the girl, clasping her small hands upon his arm, with the gesture of a coaxing child. Tell me, Nathan, about the beautiful ladies; did you see—the queen?"

"I saw the old queen, Atossa, but yesterday; she was at the banquet given by the king to the seven princes and the satraps of the province."

"Oh, the Queen—Atossa, did you say her name was? How curious and pretty! Do you know, I do not like my name overmuch. Hadassah—it hath a harsh sound; do you not think so, Nathan?"

"I love your name, sweet, as I love everything about you; but I will give you another name; shall I?"

"Yes; oh, yes; if it be a sweet one."

"It is a Persian name, and its significance is Star of Love. Is not that sweet? It shall be for me and thee alone. Come, I will give it thee for a kiss, beloved, a kiss which I will carry away into far Greece through war and rapine perchance, and bring it back to thee unpolluted."

"Well, then; kiss me, and tell me the name."

Nathan's strong arm tightened about the pliant maiden form till it lay against his breast. Then he set his lips upon hers in a long, passionate kiss. "Star of Love," he whispered, "Esther!"

The Hebrew scribe, known as Matacas in the Persian court, failed to recognize his many acquaintances as he rode through the streets of Shushan on his homeward way; his head drooped forward upon his broad breast, his deep-set eyes seemed to be fixed upon the motions of the large, slow-stepping mule which bore him. Truth to tell, his mind was full to overflowing of many serious and weighty matters; chief among them being the wording of a new and most important edict which had been intrusted to him, as chief among the palace scribes, to frame into suitable phrase and

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form in all the seventy languages spoken in the scattered provinces, and of which he alone was master. The fact that he had been singled out by name for the king's impassioned appeal, to the exclusion of Haman and other noble Persians present, scarcely occurred to his mind; yet its effect upon the facile courtiers of Xerxes had been marked. Already the palace was buzzing with it, and more than one envious eye marked the tall, spare figure and brooding face of the Hebrew as he strode through the corridors, past whispering groups of slaves and courtiers, apparently oblivious to their deep interest, and wholly unaware of the myriad speculations excited by his presence.

Matacas was to be no longer scrivener, said one, but was shortly to be advanced to a prominent position in the king's gate, as the great anteroom facing the northern portico was called. He had already received a rich reward, declared another; and this person was ready to swear to the number of gold darics and the weight of the many-linked chain of office which Bigthan, chief of the king's treasury, had delivered to him.

As a matter of fact, the king had no thought of rewarding the man who, albeit at his own request, had thrust deep the sword of separation between the mother of his sons and himself. Already the monarch had given orders concerning the future estate of Amestris, and all day Matacas had been busy transcribing his expressed wishes with regard to the moneys, estates, slaves, privileges, and emoluments to be granted to the divorced queen. The decree unalterable had gone forth, the decree of the Medes and Persians that could not be broken; but Xerxes did what he could to secure to his disgraced consort such comforts and ameliorations as were at his command, and they were many. The tire-women and attendants who had forsaken the queen in the dire hour of her need had flocked back, eager and contrite, only to find themselves barred from the royal apartments, where other

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and more beautiful maidens and slaves had already taken their places. Courtiers and princes vied with one another to do homage to the woman who from the depths of her abasement had still contrived to win the king's distinguished favor.

Nevertheless—and Matacas knit his brows afresh, a new edict was in process of framing, which provided for the choosing of another consort for the imperial majesty. It was not meet, urged the king's advisers—prominent among whom was Carchenas, a Median noble, and one in policy and ambition with Memucan, who durst not for fear of his life appear with undue prominence in the matter—it was not meet nor proper that the King's Majesty should be alone. A consort must be chosen, else the decree lately dispatched to the provinces would become a laughing stock among the people and the king himself forced to eat his own words. It might indeed be that Amestris should still, in the comparative privacy of court life, be one of the lesser wives of the monarch; but in the eyes of the nation she had been deprived of her high estate, and another better than she must be chosen.

In this crisis of affairs there were not wanting those who urged upon Xerxes the remembrance of the compact which his father Darius had made with the seven hereditary princes, providing that all consorts of royalty must be chosen from among the seven princely houses, thus precluding the intrusion of strange blood and stranger religions through foreign or barbaric alliances, and utterly doing away with the danger incident to the influence of those baser creatures of the court, who might by sheer charm of physical beauty or by ill-nurtured fascinations of magic, black or white, obtain such complete ascendancy over the royal will as to be proclaimed queens and consorts.

There were several marriageable princesses from among whom the king might choose. But Xerxes angrily refused

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to be cajoled or coerced further. He had been deceived when in his cups, he said bitterly, and had thereby been forced to give up the wife whom he had chosen in his youth; but he would do no further. War, he declared, should be his sole mistress for the present, and in that the succession was already provided for in case of his unlooked-for demise, there could be no fault to find with his decision.

It was the Chief Chamberlain Hegai, or Hegé, as he was oftener called, who at last obtained the ear of the king in one of his softer moments and begged permission to resort to one of the ancient and picturesque customs of the Oriental Court.

“Let me, most devoted of a myriad slaves,” entreated this silver-tongued individual, “during the absence of the King’s Majesty in Greece, send officers into all the provinces of his vast kingdom, and let these persons gather all the fairest of the young maidens and give them into my charge here in the palace, and when the King’s divine Majesty returns victorious from his wars, let him choose among them, and the maiden which pleases the king shall be made queen, according to his royal word which he has spoken.”

And Xerxes, vastly displeased with all the passion and furor of the matter, and, truth to tell, wearied to the full measure of his endurance by the unceasing tears and complaints of Amestris, whom, it appeared, nothing could comfort or appease, gave Hegé leave to do as he had said.

“I will choose a queen and consort when I return from my campaign into Greece,” he said openly, and from this decision no one durst venture to move him; not even Amestris, who had grown haggard and unlovely under the stress of her grief and abasement; nor yet Atossa, who had already on her part chosen for her son Artisonna, a blond princess of Media.

All these things Matacas, the chief scribe of Xerxes, was turning over in his mind when he dismounted from his beast

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at his own door, and gave the animal into the hand of his servant.

As he set foot across his threshold he heard a subdued murmur of voices from the courtyard, and being desirous to learn what visitor had ventured, without his express leave, to enter his house in his absence, he paused; and so it chanced that he heard certain of the words of Nathan, prince of Edom, to Hadassah, his ward and cousin.

Being a discreet man, and moreover desiring time to arrange his thoughts which had indeed woven themselves into a rich confusion, like the parti-colored threads of the rug-weavers of Ispahan, he quietly withdrew his foot from the door, and stood without, waiting for Nathan to appear.





IV



HE undisguised start with which the royal guardsman recognized the scribe, standing grave and motionless in the shadow of his own doorway, and the flush of angry confusion which mounted to his forehead, caused a quiet smile to curl the lips of Matacas.

“The Prince of Edom doeth my poor house honor,” he said in the Hebrew tongue, as he bowed before the martial young figure; “but why visit it during my absence? Is not my presence and my converse pleasing to thee, that thou dost choose the woman Abihail in my stead?”

“I came not to see Abihail,” answered Nathan, with an honest confusion of countenance which became him well.

“Who, then?”

“Surely thou knowest, Mordecai; and why dissemble? I am not of the courtiers of Xerxes, though I am his soldier; and thou art a Hebrew like myself. Why not speak truth one to the other, as becometh sons of Abraham?”

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“Speak then, and tell me who it is in my poor house that has merited thy most distinguished regard, son of Asa.”

“Nay, thou mockest me, Mordecai. And if the truth will please thee, hear it. I love Hadassah, thy kinswoman, and I entreat thee to give her to me in betrothal, that when I return from the king’s business I may take her to be my wife in all honor.”

Mordecai looked down upon the ground in silence. He was thinking of many things, and he could not at once bring himself to utter the formal word of consent, for which the young prince waited impatiently.

“It is true that I have neither lands, houses, nor gold,” continued Nathan, without waiting for an answer. “So this we may omit to discuss; but I shall have all three, if Jehovah prosper me, when I return in one—two years’ time. There can be no haste to wed the maiden, since she is little more than a child. Always I have loved her, since the days when I carried her, a tiny child, upon my shoulder to peep into the birds’ nests in the old olive tree. To-day it hath pleased thee to forget the past; but perchance a court matter hath irked thee. For my part, I am often sad or angry at my post in the fortress. But what may a captive do in a land of strange customs and strange gods?”

Something in these impetuous words appeared to have given Matacas—or Mordecai, as he was called by those of his own race—a clew to his answer.

“Thou has spoken wisely, Nathan, and as becometh a prince of Israel. I had not, indeed, forgotten the fact of thy intimacy in my family; but of late I have repeatedly cautioned Abihail against admitting anyone during my absence. The bud is already unfolding into a blossom, and I would not that any profane or heathen eye gaze upon its hidden beauty. And so I confess I was angry when I heard the sound of voices from within.”

“My eyes are those neither of a profane man nor a

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heathen," laughed Nathan, once more at his ease, and confident of the success of his wooing, "and I would fain pluck the lovely flower and wear it in my bosom. I await only thy consent, my Mordecai, to give to the maiden Hadassah the tokens of betrothal."

"You should have awaited my consent before speaking to her of your passion," said Mordecai frowning.

Even as he spoke the words his thoughts, which had been groping confusedly among the tangled mazes of court intrigue for more than an hour past, suddenly flashed an amazing picture before his eyes. He held his peace, however, and continued to gaze somewhat coldly and impassively at the young prince, who had flushed angrily at his last words.

"So you were listening?"

"I was about to enter my own house, and I—overheard," amended Mordecai suavely.

"Be it so! I care not who knows of my passion for Hadassah. I do love her, and no woman was ever better beloved by man."

"Softly, softly, my son. Hadassah is but a child, a little innocent child, who knows not what love is; and I am content that she remain unwooed and unwed for the present."

"Then you will not consent to our betrothal?" Bitter disappointment rang in the young soldier's voice; his dark eyes blazed passionately upon the older man. "Remember that I am of the royal line, though I am poor and a captive."

"Hadassah is also among the descendants of Jehoiakim, the king," murmured Mordecai, seemingly quite unmoved, "and she will be—very beautiful."

Nathan stared keenly at the scribe's contemplative face. Something that he saw there appeared to enrage him beyond measure.

"I believe you are thinking of placing her in the royal

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gynæceum," he burst out in the Persian tongue. "But, no; I was mad to have thought of such a thing! You could not sell your own flesh and blood—even to a king. Forgive me, Mordecai, I entreat you!"

The scribe's pallid face had gradually assumed a deep purple flush; he opened his lips to reply; then closed them firmly and turned as if to enter his door.

The young prince grasped him by the arm.

"Thou shalt not leave me thus, Mordecai," he cried hoarsely. "I know not what put such a monstrous thought into my head. Nay, I swear I did not even think it; it sprang suddenly from my lips like an arrow from a taut string, and wholly without my leave. I am sorry. Forgive me!"

Mordecai turned, for he had by this time gotten the better of his well-nigh ungovernable anger.

"I will forgive thee, son of Asa," he said, in cold, measured tones; since anger and malice of heart ill become captives and strangers in an alien land."

"And Hadassah——?"

"Go thy way, Prince, and think no more of the maid till thou are returned from the campaign. Who can say how the event will turn? And it were not well to make a widow of one who is no wife. Nay, leave her to me, and go."

He stepped inside as he spoke, and without further farewell or salutation deliberately barred the door in the young soldier's face.

"By the shrine of Ashtoreth, what evil have I wrought by my own hasty tongue!" muttered the prince. And having relieved the tension of his over-wrought nerves by this wholly pagan oath, he went away, humiliated and angry, it is true, yet with a comforting memory hugged warm to his heart of the exceeding sweetness of the maiden's lips when she had yielded them to his own in exchange for the name he had given her.

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“Esther—Esther—Star of Love and Good Fortune!” he sang in his heart. “Now light me to the path of glory; then show me how to win the lady of my soul!”

The words sang themselves over and over as he strode back through the narrow streets of Shushan, and climbed the long staircase which led up to the great fortress of Xerxes.





V



HE sun had set in a blaze of crimson, gold, and purple behind the black mountains, and the pure waves of color pulsing almost to the zenith were softening and paling under the light of the moon, which appeared to soar upward from the vast undulating plains on the east like a monstrous disk of burnished silver, reflecting the golden glory of the vanished sun. The maiden Hadassah, leaning sidewise upon the roof parapet, watched the pageant of the changing sky in pensive silence. Near her sat Abihail, the ancient dame whom Mordecai had chosen to be the girl's nurse and guardian when, a tiny child, she had been intrusted to him by her dying mother in distant Babylon.

Abihail was working busily with her distaff and spindle, and she cast an occasional glance of veiled displeasure at the graceful, indolent figure of her charge. The girl intercepted one of these glances and burst into a soft laugh of amusement.

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“Poor Abihail!” she murmured in her sweet, childish voice, “does Mordecai, then, demand of thee a tale of work, that thou must continue to labor while all nature is going to rest? See, the swallows are flying homeward to their nests, and the cattle and sheep are all folded. The doves have gone to their cote long since and the bees no longer hum about the flowers; the sun has vanished and the moon that lights us to our beds shines in the sky. Put by thy distaff, dear, good Abihail, and rest, and listen to the nightingales; already they are beginning to sing in the rose gardens of the palace yonder. Ah, if only I might walk in those wondrous gardens and see the flowers and the sparkling fountains and the beautiful ladies! But I suppose I never shall.”

The old woman mumbled something under her breath, and the maid shrugged her shoulders and turned again to her contemplation of the sky and the darkening plain and the fitting swallows. Above the subdued hum of the city rose a silver thread of sound, now loud, now soft, the song of many nightingales singing amid the rose thickets of Shushan, the palace, whose marble towers and columns glistened afar in the white moonbeams like the airy structure of a dream.

“And Nathan has gone, too,” sighed the maiden, speaking her thoughts aloud, more to please herself than the ancient dame with the spindle. “Gone without bidding me farewell. To-day I saw the legions of the great king, thousands upon thousands of them, marching away across the plain. There was music, too; but I could not hear it well for the clash of armor and the ring of spears. Oh, and the horses! If thou wert not so stupid, Abihail, as to wish to scour the copper pans and jars all day thou mightest also have seen them.”

“The pans must needs be scoured,” grumbled the old woman, “and that whether the king goes to war or stays at home.”

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"Yes, it is true," and the girl knit her delicate brows. "We eat and drink, and sleep, and rise again; and the king goes to war; and beautiful ladies laugh and weep; and the nightingales sing—nothing of it matters to me, who am like a captive bird in a cage, beating my wings against the bars."

"Beat not thy wings, child; the cage is but a place of safety. Kings, ladies, and foolish laughter are nothing to thee."

"And yet sometimes I have strange fancies and dreams, Abihail. To-day I know not whether I slept or wakened. It was the hot hour of noon, and thou wast fast asleep under the shadow of the vine, when I fancied—or dreamed—I know not which—that I was a great lady—a queen, Abihail."

"A foolish dream, child; think not of it; it will bring thee discontent."

"But I must think of something, Abihail. What else may I do? Thou wilt not let me scour the pans, nor even draw the water, and I cannot spin an even thread for all thy teaching."

The old woman laughed harshly.

"Nay, I would set thee at the scouring fast enough, but Mordecai hath forbidden it. He says it is not meet for the daughter of kings to perform the service of slaves. I am not a slave; yet I must needs do all these things."

"When I am a great lady, Abihail, thou shalt scour no more pans," said the girl dreamily. "I will see to it."

"Oh, thou, thou art but a foolish maid and very ignorant. I cannot think what Mordecai will do with thee."

The girl trembled and drew her mantle closer about her.

"Mordecai loves me," she said after a while; but her sweet voice shook and a tear glistened on her dark, curling lashes. "And—and Nathan loves me; he has told me so many times; and you love me; do you not, Abihail? But,

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alas! there is no one else in all the wide, wide world. I am quite, quite alone save for you three; and—Nathan has gone away with the soldiers.”

“He may never come back,” croaked the old woman. Then she got heavily to her feet, for she had overmuch flesh, and crossed the roof to where the girl had bowed her head on the parapet. “Nay, my lamb, do not weep! Abihail will make thee a sweet posset for thy supper.”

The girl’s slight figure was shaken with sobs, for the song of the nightingales had grown of a sudden unbearably sweet, and the scent of roses which swept by on the evening breeze seemed laden with loneliness.

“Come, come!” said the old woman impatiently. “I hear Mordecai at the gate below, I must go down and let him in, and I would not that he find thee weeping.”

The girl obediently dried her innocent tears, which, after all, had no deeper source than a sort of infantile longing for sunshine and the gay and glittering things of life, thus far denied her.

“If thou makest a sweet posset, Abihail, put into it, I pray thee, a spoonful of the rose conserve; I love roses.”

“Eh, roses and spices and raisins and honey; I will put them all in, my pretty; but do thou gather up my spinning and fasten the thread as I have taught thee, else thou shalt not taste my posset this night.”

Mordecai was more silent than his wont at the supper to which all three presently sat down in the humble intimacy of home. The seven-beaked lamp of bronze which hung from the ceiling of the room where the meal was spread cast bright lights and flitting shadows on the charming face of his ward, and again and yet again the deep eyes of the scribe dwelt thoughtfully upon it.

At length he pushed back his burnished bowl in token that the meal was finished.

“Didst see the departure of the armies of the king

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from the roof, as I gave thee leave to-day, Hadassah?" he asked.

The girl daintily plucked the last plum from her porridge, before she answered, with the freedom of a petted child: "Yes, my Mordecai; it was a grand sight, was it not? I longed to be nearer. If only Abihail might have taken me to the street, I could have seen everything far better. Perhaps then I might have waved farewell to Nathan."

She spoke with a careless serenity which did not escape the watchful eye of her guardian.

"Did he not bid thee farewell?" he asked cautiously. "I thought he came for that express purpose two days ago."

The girl looked at him with her calm, bright eyes; then she smiled, showing the even edges of her white teeth.

"Nay," she said, "on that day he would talk of nothing save of all the ways in which he loves me. I could not remember them all, and he was teaching me."

"Hah! A skilled teacher, I doubt not; and didst thou learn the lesson to his liking, child?"

"Nay, I could not; he will be forced to tell it me many, many times before I have it perfect. But now he has gone, and I cannot see him again."

Large childish tears gathered in her dark eyes and dropped unchecked to the soft oval of her cheek.

"And so you grieve sorely for Nathan, do you, little one?" Mordecai's voice held a carefully disguised anxiety.

"How can I help it, Mordecai, when I shall be so dull now that he has gone. Besides, he promised to bring me jewels of gold to wear in my ears and golden bracelets for my arms; he said he would ask thee if I might have them at his hands; but he did not bring them after all. I should so like to wear a bracelet. I never had one."

The scribe's thoughtful face cleared, and he smiled and

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sighed as if some unseen burden had been lifted from his spirit.

"Wouldst thou like a bracelet of my giving as well as if Nathan clasped it on thy arm?" he asked gently.

"Yes, oh, yes! wilt thou give me a bracelet, dear Mordecai?"

Mordecai arose and crossing the room unlocked the great, brass-bound cabinet of dark, ancient wood, which stood in one corner.

"Come hither, maiden, and I will show thee thy dowry, which thou hadst from thy mother, who was a princess of the house of Jehoiakim," he said, groaning within himself as the glittering key turned in the lock.

Hadassah stood breathless and with clasped hands of wonder, while her guardian drew forth rich robes broided with seed pearls and thread of gold; veils of tissue, blue and white; delicate tunics of many colors, and wonderful undergarments rich with needlework.

"Are they mine—all these beautiful things?" she cried. "Oh, Abihail, do come and see what Mordecai is showing me!"

"I have seen them many times, child," said the old woman, turning her back to conceal her emotion. Mordecai had spoken a word to her on his entering the house that night which had set her old heart to beating with fear of what the future might have in store for her nursling.

"Thou hast seen them—and not told me?" echoed the girl wonderingly. "Nay, but thou didst tell me that the cabinet contained the scrolls of the prophets only and dry and dusty parchments, and that I would not care to see them. But, look! Ah, how beautiful! For me? For me, Mordecai?"

For the scribe, still sighing and murmuring to himself in the midst of his great beard, had opened divers caskets

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which lay stored in the deep recesses of the locked cabinet; these revealed bracelets and anklets of wrought gold—the red gold of Egypt, ropes of pearls, rings and earrings of strange jewels, which glittered red and white and blue in the wavering light of the lamp like living fires.

“All these are thine, maiden, and more. Put them on her Abihail. I would fain look upon a princess of Israel once more.”

And Abihail, who in former years had been a skilled tire-woman in the service of Tamar, mother of Hadassah, robed the girl in the splendid garments of her rank. About her neck she wound the long strands of pearls and in the tresses of her dark hair, and above all she cast a veil of silken tissue, out of which the girl's exquisite cheek and neck glowed with the satin sheen of half-blown roses, milk-white and dewy in the dawn of an Eastern morn. Upon her rounded arms gleamed gemmed bracelets and the slender ankles twinkled with gems, also. As she stood thus, half ashamed in the splendor of her young beauty, there came a thundering knock upon the gate of the courtyard.

“Stand still as thou art, maiden, till I return,” commanded Mordecai, as the girl started in fright. “And do thou, Abihail, choose a mantle which shall cover the maid securely.

He strode away to the gate and the two women heard his voice speaking to some one in the street without. When he returned he stood for an instant gazing at the exquisite picture of the maid in all the alien magnificence of her garb—gazed, and dashed his hand across his eyes, as if to banish therefrom a different picture.

“I have something to tell thee, child; something I long, yet dread, to say. I believe it is for the best—for the best—not only for thee and me, but also—for—our—people.”

The words seemed to be forced from him, each word a separate groan. His face was drawn and ghastly as if with

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mortal agony. The girl flew to his side regardless now of her rich robes and ornaments.

“Oh, Mordecai! What ails thee? Art thou ill? Art thou afraid? What, what is it?”

“Nay, I am not ill. It—is—nothing. I have nurtured thee and brought thee up from a child. I have shown thee no unkindness; have I, maiden?”

“Nay, nay, Mordecai; but thou art ill!”

“I have loved thee as my own flesh and blood. I have not spared myself in thy service night or day. I have kept the vow I made to thy father. To thy mother also I swore it that I would care for thee with my life, and with my life’s blood protect thee from all evil. Have I kept my vow, Hadassah?”

“Yes, oh, yes, Mordecai! Thou hast been to me father and mother and friend and lover—all, all I have found in thee!”

“Then listen. I must go to the palace to live henceforth. My duty to the king demands it. I have a new office there. I cannot leave thee here alone. Thou also—must—go—to the palace. God of Abraham, thou knowest I have been forced to it; almost against my will! If thou art leading us, I pray thee grant me some token of thy good pleasure! It is not for my glory—nor for her alone—that I am doing this thing, which appears altogether hateful in my eyes, but for—thy—people, Jehovah—thy captive people, in danger—in peril—thou alone knowest the perils which even now overshadow us!”

In the silence which followed a single peal as of distant thunder reverberated through the heavens from end to end. A majestic sound, slow, mighty, godlike. Mordecai dropped his head; his blanched features relaxed into their wonted expression of dignified serenity.

“It is spoken,” he said in a deep, calm voice. “Already the litters wait without. Do thou, Abihail, accompany thy

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princess, that she feel not overstrange in a strange place. And now attend me, Hadassah; to no one reveal thy birth, or the circumstance of thy nativity. Thou wilt receive a new name. Be known only by that name in future. Tell to no one thy kinship to me. I shall be near thee. Thou canst communicate with me by a sure means, which I will provide. On thine obedience hangs thy life, thy fate, and mine. Dost thou understand me?"

"I—understand. But, oh, Mordecai, where am I going? and why——?"

"To the palace, child. There thou wilt be received and cared for with all honor. Do not fear; only obey me."

"I—will—obey!"





VI



ANY months had elapsed since the departure of Xerxes with his mighty hosts, and though at uncertain intervals swift couriers sent out by the queen had returned to the court bearing brief official reports of the welfare of the king and his armies, there had been no satisfactory news. Amestris, the disgraced consort of the king, reestablished in what appeared more than her former magnificence, had sunken at last into a state of fretful apathy from which her attendants strove in vain to rouse her.

“My husband has cast me off,” she moaned, “and my sons are also snatched from my arms. Why, then, should I live longer?”

It was her daughter Amytis who supplied a reason, when at length the girl had grown weary of the continual complaints and futile grief of the queen. The two were seated in the garden one day, the girl busy with the embroidery which she had learned from one of her slaves, and with

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which she saw fit to employ herself during the interminable hours of the long, idle days.

“You should live, gracious queen and mother,” said the young princess, with a chilling hauteur of manner which reminded her unhappy mother of the girl’s kinship to Atossa, “you should continue to exist in order that you may avenge yourself upon your enemies.”

And the careless words of the girl at once took root in the shallow nature of Amestris, and in process of time, watered by her secret tears and nurtured by her apprehensions, they flourished and grew into monstrous proportions.

But in these early days of her quasi-widowhood the queen loved best to babble unceasingly of her husband; of his strength; of his great stature; of his beauty; of the vastness and glory of his kingdom. And she longed to hear more particularly of how he fared on his journey, the hardships of which she magnified out of all due relation to facts. And when at last Artaxerxes, the youngest of her three sons, was brought back to her from the front, ill with some childish complaint, she received him with hungry arms.

The boy was sullen, and at first could hardly be brought to tell much of the great sights he had seen along the route.

“I was not sick,” he burst out, “only my brothers would have it so. Darius and Hystaspes were most unkind; and when they found that I had a redness of the face and eyes—truly it was nothing more than the heat of the sun, and I said so—they would not listen; but reported the matter to our father, and he sent Zethar, the physician, to me. And Zethar—may he perish of the plague—would not listen to me when I told him I was not sick, but gave orders to have me put into a litter forthwith, like a woman, and fetched back to the palace. Had it not been for Nathan, the captain of the guard, who came with me, I should have died with anger. But he amused me with many wondrous stories of

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that strange city of the Hebrews, Jerusalem, and so I did not die on the journey; but lived, as you see."

Amestris clasped and kissed her son, who, indeed, was little more than a child, though at twelve years he thought himself a man, and carried the short sword of a Persian general and gave himself the stern airs of a warrior, as became a prince and the son of a great king. And when he had been fed with dainties and appeased with comfits, such as children love, he gave orders that Nathan, the captain of the guard, be sent for.

He will tell you of the king, my father, better than I can; and of the sailing match and other matters; and I will listen and say if he speaks the truth."

And the young despot made himself vastly comfortable with many soft cushions at the feet of his sister Amytis.

The royal guardsman did not at once obey the summons of the young prince, who had been his charge during the days of the homeward journey; and this for the reason that he could not be found, either in the palace or the fortress, where the chamberlains of the queen sought him. He had gone at once, armed and spurred as he was, to see how Hadassah had fared during the months of his absence. He had been ordered to rejoin the army after delivering the young prince to his mother, and he was prepared to obey on the morrow; but now he stood without the closed door of the courtyard and knocked upon it with the hilt of his sword, picturing to himself the pleased surprise of the maiden, and her joy at sight of the rich linked chain of Etruscan workmanship which he had found in a little goldsmith's shop in Abydos, where the armies had halted to be reviewed, and where it chanced the boy Artaxerxes had fallen ill of the red fever. He had determined to give the chain to Hadassah without asking leave of Mordecai; and he knocked again, loudly and impatiently, looking up to the

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roof where the pigeons cooed and rustled their silvery wings as of yore.

After a long silence steps from within sounded on the flags, and the little window high up in the stout oaken door opened a cautious hand's breadth.

"Who demands entrance to this house?" asked a croaking voice, and the wrinkled face of an old man appeared presently at the aperture, winking and blinking in the broad light of the afternoon, which streamed into the deserted street.

"It is I, Nathan, son of Asa. Open and let me in.

"Not so, soldier. I have orders to admit no one," croaked the voice behind the wagging beard, "and wert thou thrice the son of Asa, and the grandson of Abiathar, to boot, I would not open."

"I will come in, I tell you!"

"And wherefore? There is no one here except me. Have you business with me, my young sir? or—hold, you wear the liveries of the king; perhaps you have spoils, ill-gotten, it may be, to dispose of. You need not be afraid to tell me, though Mordecai—may his shadow increase—would punish me with his staff, if he knew. Hist! and I will speak with thee further after yonder mule-driver has passed."

The young prince had grown pale under all his tan.

"Tell me," he said hoarsely, "is not the maiden, Hadassah, the kinswoman of Mordecai, within? I would speak with her."

"Hadassah—Hadassah?" repeated the voice of the ancient one with a cackling laugh. "Nay, I know no maiden by that name. I am alone here. I keep the house against intruders, as you see."

"Then where has she gone? Tell me instantly, or I tear down the gate."

"You will tear down the gate, eh? And how will you

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go about it? Let me tell you it is thrice barred and locked against all such as you; and, moreover, I have here a jar of hot oil, which I will presently cast forth upon your head, if you do not go hence."

"Are you indifferent to the glitter of gold, Jew," asked Nathan contemptuously, holding up a broad piece between his thumb and forefinger. "Nay, all my captive brethren love the glitter of a Persian daric, even as I despise it. Here, take it, and tell me what has become of the household of Mordecai."

The porter cautiously reached down and snatched the piece of money, bit it, then rang it against the metal hasp of the door.

"Oh—ay; 'tis good gold; and why not love it, since it buys for us all that makes life worth living? If you love not gold, soldier, you are a fool. I, Chazeba, have said it. As for the household of Mordecai, the king's scribe, I know not of it. He hired me to keep his house for so much. I keep it. And that is all I know."

"Where is Mordecai, then?"

The old man thrust out his wrinkled lips.

"Nay, how should I know; yet even for another daric I might——"

"Take it and tell me, vulture," ordered Nathan, who was growing sick at heart with a formless, nameless fear he could not master."

"Me? I am no vulture," chuckled the warder, biting and rubbing the second piece with senile glee. "Does a vulture love gold, as I do? Can a vulture answer thy questions? And third, I will ask thee, is it meet to call a Hebrew by the name of an unclean bird?"

"Nay, it is not. I did wrong; but if you can tell me where Mordecai is, tell me, and I will go away."

"Well, then, since you have found your manners, soldier, I will tell thee that Mordecai dwells at the palace in

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these days. Anyone there can tell you where he is to be found."

And this is how it chanced that the queen's chamberlain, who had been sent to fetch Nathan, came upon the object of his search just as the guardsman was inquiring for the scribe; for he had determined in his heart to demand a straight answer from Mordecai, though he feared to ask it.

And this also explains the presence of Nathan—outwardly calm and courteous, though in his heart he was raging with impatience—in the closed garden of Amestris. There were present, disposed upon a half circle of marble benches piled with silken cushions, the queen, Amestris; her daughter, the Princess Amytis; and the young prince, Artaxerxes—too indolent, or too ignorant to answer all the questions of his mother, and the half dozen ladies in attendance, wives and daughters of nobles who had gone with their king to war. All the women were in a delighted flutter of excitement over the advent of the handsome young officer who could tell them all they would know.

"Speak first of the great king," began Amestris; "is he well, and does he often talk of me?"

"The King's Majesty is in excellent health," returned Nathan; "but would the imperial Xerxes condescend to speak to one of his servants respecting his queen? Nay, rather in his own heart would he commune of what is sacred to himself alone."

"Very pretty, worthy of a poet rather than a soldier," commented Amestris; "but I see the king has not spoken of me; yet it is true that out from the full heart some words must needs fall, like drops from a brimming goblet. Perchance he thinks no more of me, but rather of the maidens who are already gathering at Shushan for his choice. Alas, that I should live to see the day!"

"Mother!" whispered Amytis, flushing with shame as

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she perceived the smiles that flitted over the faces of the court ladies, "ask him rather of the army, of the contest of ships, of the march. 'Tis of these matters we would hear."

"I saw the sailing myself," put in the young prince, in his loud, boyish voice; "and the Phœnicians of Sidon beat, in spite of the fellows from Tyre, who had the greater sails."

"That is true, Prince," said Nathan quietly, and added a graphic picture of the great spectacle at Abydos, where Xerxes sat with his captains and princes on the apex of a little hill and reviewed the allied armies of the forty-nine nations. Before him, covering the earth like grasshoppers for number, lay the encamped armies, stretching from the hills to the sea. On the left were the blue waters of the Ægean white with the sails of thousands of ships, while between, "like a yoke placed upon the neck of a captive, the long double line of his bridges lay darkling upon the sea."

Of the wonderful bridge he told how at first the angry sea had broken it, and cast the boats which formed its foundation high upon the shore; and of how the imperial Xerxes, in his wrath, had caused the daring sea to be scourged in his presence with many scourges in the hands of stout slaves.

"And did the sea become obedient to the will of the king, guardsman?" inquired the Princess Amytis, with a mischievous twist of her scarlet lips.

"The bridge was at once rebuilt, gracious princess," replied Nathan, with a low bow, "and when I saw it last the Ægean had not again prevailed against it."

"Do you think, then, that my father is able to make the sea and the earth and the winds obey his will?" asked the girl, fixing her deep blue eyes on the handsome man who wore the imperial armor.

"Do you doubt the authority and power of the divine one, child of Xerxes, that you should ask such a question?" demanded Amestris chidingly.

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The girl cast a glance full of laughing malice at her mother.

"Nay, my queen and mother, I meant no disrespect to my father; I asked the question of the guardsman, whose name I know not. What is your name, soldier of Xerxes?"

"My name is Nathan," replied the prince, knitting his black brows. "I am a captive of the Hebrew race," he added, with the pride of one announcing his lofty rank.

"A captive, and a Hebrew?" echoed Amytis.—"Nay, my mother, but I will speak to the man. I find it amusing."

"Nathan is a prince," put in Artaxerxes, between mouthfuls of the fig paste with which he was gorging himself. "He is of royal birth, though he is but a Jew. I like him because he amuses me. When I am the great king I shall have him for my armor-bearer."

"Hush, foolish boy, you will never be king," said Amestris, wringing her hands over a speech which, she thought, presaged ill-fortune for her eldest born.

"Yes, I will be king. It is written, and no one can prevent it," persisted the boy, and cackled with vainglorious laughter to see his mother turn her eyes toward the distant shrine of Auramazda with a muttered prayer.

"It has not pleased Nathan, prince of the Hebrews, to answer my former question," put in Amytis, openly scornful of the foolish boy and his yet more foolish mother.

"The question concerned the divinity of the great king," said Nathan coolly, "and I cannot answer it, princess."

"Nay, 'will not' is what you mean."

"As you will, gracious princess."

"I believe my father is a man; and no man, even though he be lord of the whole earth, can compel the winds and the sea to obey him. I should have laughed aloud had I been there to see the slaves scourging the wild Ægean."

"Amytis!" cried the queen, lifting her delicate hands in horror, "what is it that you are saying?"

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"The truth, for once," said the girl, her lips curling scornfully. "I am not surprised that you wonder at it. It is not fashionable at Shushan to be truthful."

She lifted her blue eyes to meet the gaze of the royal guardsman fixed full upon her. Her own glance wavered and sank and a rosy color flashed into her young face.

"Tell us of the passage of the bridge," she said hastily.

"I left Abydos with the prince on the fifth day," said Nathan, "and the hosts were still crossing, the laggards urged forward under the lash.

"On the first day 'The Immortals,' the guard of the great king wherein no vacancy can ever exist, crossed; they wore garlands on their helmets and their swords were wreathed with myrtle. Just before they set foot on the structure, the sea, which had previously been scourged at the command of Xerxes, was appeased by a libation. The priests cast a golden bowl, a golden goblet, and a sword into the water, praying aloud to Mithra for the conquest of the king's enemies."

"May Mithra and all the gods graciously grant it!" exclaimed the queen piously. "Tell me of the king's passage."

"The king, borne in the sacred chariot and drawn by seven white horses of Arabia, passed over on the second day, amid clouds of incense and the acclamations of the people.

"Did you see his face?"

"I saw not his face, gracious queen, because of the incense, and also because, having been already detailed to fetch home the sick prince, I was stationed with my troop at some distance from the bridge."

"Alas! I would you had seen it," sighed Amestris, shaking her head. "I fear me the king, my husband, is not full fleshed in these days. There can be nothing fit to eat in a camp."

The blue eyes of the princess flashed with vexation.

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“Let the soldier go his way,” she said hastily. “There can be nothing more of interest. Go!” she said sharply, turning to Nathan, who, impatient to be gone, yet waited for the queen’s permission to withdraw.

“You are most unceremonious, Amytis,” complained the queen, with a querulous sigh. “But I suppose I must expect to be set aside from henceforth even by my children.”

She lifted her hand languidly in token that the audience was finished, and Nathan passed out into the great corridor.

This ran lengthwise through the palace of the women, as it was called, opening at intervals upon various apartments, each of which boasted its private bath, gardens, and quarters for attendants. Nathan had never been in this part of the palace before, and he walked along, his mailed heels ringing on the pavement, scarce knowing in which direction to go. There were numbers of slaves squatted on their heels before heavily curtained doors, but no one spoke to the guardsman, though more than one pair of dark eyes followed his martial presence with amazed curiosity.

As he paused in some uncertainty at an intersection of two broad corridors, where a flower-encircled fountain cast its glittering spray high in air, he came upon a veiled figure, which stopped short at sight of him, scrutinized him through an aperture in the mantle, then gave vent to a muffled cry of amazement.

“Nathan!—or hath Jehovah shown me a vision?” murmured a low voice in the Hebrew tongue.

The woman had dropped the shrouding mantle from her face, and the attendant of Hadassah stood revealed before him.

“Abihail!” he exclaimed. Then as his mind seized upon the meaning of her presence, he seized the woman by the arm. “Nay, you shall not leave me thus,” for the Jewess, with every appearance of terror, was hurrying away from him as rapidly as her impeding garments would allow.

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"Hist!" she exclaimed, "do not speak above a whisper. The very walls have ears in this place. What are you doing here? Do you not know that it is death for any man save the king to set foot within these halls?"

"Nay, good Abihail, there are many men about," Nathan said soothingly. "I have just come from an audience with the queen, and no one told me where I might not walk."

He stooped over the woman, who struggled weakly in his grasp.

"Where is Hadassah?" he demanded.

"I do not know," mumbled Abihail.

"You are telling me a lie, woman. Where is Hadassah, the kinswoman of Mordecai? Answer me!"

"Jehovah help me, what shall I do? But do not breathe that name! She is known here as Esther."

"As *Esther!* God in heaven!"

"No one knows her Jewish origin. Mordecai would kill me if he knew I had told you of her presence here. Let me go, I entreat you, before the slave yonder sees me talking with you!"

"Here, hide behind these vines and plants—so!" and Nathan pulled the woman roughly into a deep recess in the wall shielded from general view by masses of foliage. "Hadassah is here, you say. Why?"

"Do you not know?"

"How could I know when I have but yesterday returned from Greece? I go back to-morrow. Tell me instantly of Hadassah."

"I cannot. Indeed, I do not altogether understand," gasped the old woman, peering fearfully out from between the thick foliage and clustering blossoms of a great rose tree. "I only know that Mordecai caused us to be fetched to this place one night many moons—I know not how many—ago, and she—Esther, I must call her so—was re-

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ceived like a princess. She has magnificent apartments, gardens, slaves, a banquet every day. Nay, she is like a queen; but she loves me still. Though I am old and ugly she makes of me a favorite. No other is allowed to attend her in her bath; no other— But how am I babbling who am sworn to silence and secrecy. Let me go, Nathan. I can say no more."

The young prince was staring into space with terrible, unseeing eyes; but he still kept fast hold of the woman's mantle.

"Does—any man—does Mordecai—see her?" he asked in a dry whisper.

"No man, not even Mordecai, hath seen the maid since her coming. Hegé, indeed, comes ever and anon to ask after the gracious princess, as he is pleased to call my pretty one; but Hegé is no man," and the old woman cackled in derision. "I am afraid of him though, and of the others; they are like weasels, cunning and bloodthirsty. They would choke out my old breath with a bowstring if they caught me here. Let me go, Nathan—dear, good Nathan!"

"I will let you go, woman; but not now, lest yonder gay dragon pounce upon you."

The old Jewess squeaked like a rat and flattened herself against the wall.

"'Tis Hegé!" she whispered. "If he finds us here, we are both lost!"

The tall broad figure of a man had appeared at the farther end of the corridor, and the slave girls squatted at all the curtained doorways scrambled to their feet to do him obeisance as he passed in his leisurely progress. He wore a scarlet tunic and cap, and a rich jeweled chain of office depended from about his neck.

"Alas! that I saw you," whispered the woman. "He will instantly detect the glitter of your armor, and I shall

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be forced to see you slain where you stand. Let me go, Nathan. I, at least, can escape. If I am seen here with you it will ruin *her*, monster and ingrate that you are!"

Nathan groaned aloud; but he at once relaxed his hold upon Abihail's garment, and the woman glided swiftly away like a shadow and disappeared.

The squat scarlet figure of the chief chamberlain had approached the fountain by this time. Nathan could see his broad, flat face, and keen eyes distinctly, as he advanced with short, mincing steps along the rich, many-colored carpets which overlaid the slippery marble of the vast corridor.

Knowing an attempt at concealment to be quite futile before the sharp glances that darted hither and yon like sword thrusts, Nathan stepped boldly out, and stood in the full glitter of the sunshine.

Hegé stopped short.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a strange, lifeless voice, his colorless eyes deliberately taking in the details of the guardsman's uniform. "You are a soldier—a deserter from the army, perhaps."

"I have lost my way," said Nathan, disdainful of the insinuation of the eunuch's last words. He dropped his hand to the hilt of his short sword. "I have but just come from an audience with the Queen's Majesty, and no man told me in which direction to walk."

The official's large, pallid face was distorted with an ugly frown, as he answered: "There is no queen, save Atossa, the gracious mother of Xerxes. And you are lying, for she has received no one to-day. You have come here to see some woman. Who is it?"

"I have spoken the truth. Upon the king's sword which I bear, I swear it. I came from Abydos yesterday with an escort of cavalry to fetch the prince, Artaxerxes. To-day, at the express command of her who is still called queen by those who honor the king's wishes, I related certain matters

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concerning the army before the gracious Amestris, the prince, the princess, and ladies of the court."

"My permission was not asked for such an audience," hissed the eunuch. "Let Amestris beware. The days of her power as of her beauty are numbered."

He beat his palms softly together, and four or five gigantic Nubians appeared, as suddenly and noiselessly as if they had sprung out of enchanted ground.

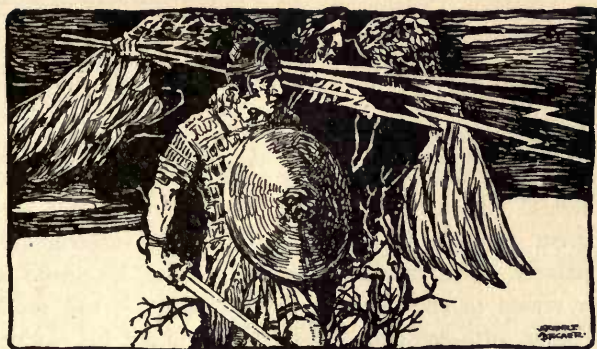
"Take this fellow to the dungeon beneath my anteroom," commanded Hegé, pointing to the discomfited guardsman; "I will look into his matter at my leisure."

The slaves instantly fastened upon Nathan like black apes, pinioning his arms and blindfolding him with incredible swiftness and skill. Then, despite his vigorous resistance, he felt himself dragged away down vaulted corridors which echoed the muffled tread of his captors' feet, and down long flights of steps, which he counted mechanically. He was set upon his feet at last, and heard the sound of heavy bolts rasping in their sockets and the grating of a key in a rusty lock. Once more he struggled violently against the sinewy hands that clutched him like the tentacles of some evil monster.

"Let me go, slaves!" he commanded. "I am the king's guardsman and am ordered to return to the front to-morrow. Detain me at your peril!"

"To-morrow?" muttered a mocking voice in his ear. "There is no to-morrow for those who offend our master. Wert thou a king's son it would not avail thee now."

Nathan felt himself loosed from his bonds and pushed violently forward; the grasping hands loosened their clutch upon his limbs, and he stumbled down three or four steps, his hands outspread in the blackness.



VII



HE Hebrew prince tore the bandage from his eyes and stared about him in the darkness. He could see nothing at first, and there was no sound save the faint drip and gurgle of water. Presently he became aware by means of that mysterious sixth sense which has never been entirely lacking from the mental equipment of man, nor yet wholly explained by him, that some other person was near. Just where the unseen, silent presence, of whose reality he was confident, lurked, he could not tell. He stood quite still on the steps, searching the darkness with eyes which gradually revealed to him the interior of a low-ceiled room lighted only by a faint elusive gleam in a far corner. This light, moreover, did not appear constant; but brightened and gloomed at irregular intervals. Of the dimensions of the place he could judge nothing, and so at length he stepped boldly down to the floor level and began a cautious exploration of his surroundings. With his drawn sword he felt the floor before

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him, mindful of pitfalls which existed, it was rumored, in the depths of the great platform upon which the palace stood.

Step by step he advanced, his sword clinking against the pavement. He had reached the wall now, and felt it with his hands. It was built, he perceived, not of marble but of the great sun-dried bricks which formed the substructure of the palaces. Still cautiously feeling his way, his sword suddenly ceased to click against the pavement; it had touched something soft—something that stirred under his exploring fingers and moaned faintly. The capricious light brightened and revealed to his astonished eyes the faint outline of a huddled shape crouched against the wall.

“You have come—to kill—me—at last,” moaned the feeble voice. “I am—glad. Do not wait to terrify me longer.”

“A woman!” exclaimed Nathan. “How did you come here? But do not fear, I have not come to kill you. I am a prisoner like yourself.”

“May Jehovah be merciful to thee, for there is no escape from the horrors of this place.”

“You are a Hebrew?”

“I am; a slave, also. That is why I am here. I laughed when the queen prayed before her gods. She worships Ash-toreth that her beauty may be preserved, Bel and Nabon for fear they will punish her for crimes committed in her past, Ahuramadza because it is the fashion, and Mithra because the sun rules the heavens and cannot be looked upon for his splendor even by a queen.”

“And you laughed, who were a captive and a slave?”

“I did not think the queen could see me. I was polishing the golden jars of her toilet table, and the great silver mirror which tells her lies every day; and I thought I might laugh a little—in my mantle—at the thoughts which visited me at sight of the great Queen Atossa prostrating herself

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before the ivory images. For once the mirror told her no lies. She saw me reflected in it and bade the eunuchs fetch me away."

"But no one worships images in the palace. The king counts them among the seven abominations, and has ordered all such in his kingdom destroyed with them that worship them. You must be mistaken."

The woman was silent for a moment; then she laughed weakly.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And why do we babble of gods and their images in this place? If there be a God, Jehovah or Ahuramadza, get you to your prayers. For myself I have prayed enough."

"How long have you been here?" asked Nathan.

"Two—three days, it may be. I know not. They gave me a loaf and a jar of water the first day. Since then nothing."

She leaned toward the man at her side, a sick horror in her dry whisper.

"There was another—a woman—in the corner yonder, when I was thrust in here. She could not speak, but only moan. She has not moaned for many hours now. I dare not go to her to see why."

"I will see why," Nathan said; "then I will take you away from this place."

"You? You cannot. There is but one door, and it is fastened."

"The light up yonder, what is it?"

"I cannot tell. It comes and goes, as you see. It maddens me, that light."

The man said nothing as he began his cautious exploration of the place once more. Twice he paused before what appeared to be a deeper spot in the prevailing gloom. Once his sword point came in contact with garments of some sort lying upon the floor. He examined these, feeling them care-

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fully with his naked hands—a mantle of coarse texture, a veil. They told him nothing.

“Have you found the—the other?” asked the faint voice of the slave from her corner.

“I have found nothing,” replied Nathan, who had completed the circuit of the place and felt himself once more at the flight of steps down which he had been pushed by the slaves.

“What could have become of her? I have not slept. I know I have not slept, though I have dreamed—God, what dreams!”

Grown somewhat more confident the Hebrew prince started to walk across the floor of the dungeon, his sword point still tapping the stones before him. He had traversed perhaps half the space which intervened betwixt him and the crouching figure of the slave when his outstretched weapon ceased to ring against the stones, but instead slid downward, touching nothing at all. Stooping as he was Nathan barely escaped the slippery verge. He drew back, lay down full length upon the floor, and reached forth an exploring arm. Cautiously he crawled on all fours about the edge of what he presently discovered to be a circular well or pit of unknown depth. He reached down into it, tapping its side with his sword; but touched nothing, though far beneath he fancied he could hear the flow of water.

The slave girl, alarmed at the dubious sounds which came to her in the darkness, called to him weakly.

“Where are you?” she entreated. “I am coming to you!”

“Stay where you are, woman. Do not move from the wall for your life! I will come to you presently, when I have found what sort of demon’s work is here.”

Satisfied at length of the extent of the well and of its approximate nearness to the encircling wall, he drew back from its verge, which he had discovered to be convex and

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polished like the lip of an urn, and made his way to the spot where the trembling slave clung close to the wall.

“What did you find?” she whispered. “Nay, do not speak overloud, I fancy sometimes that there are eyes watching me—and breathing in the darkness.”

“There is nothing at all in the place, save the four walls and an unguarded well in the middle,” Nathan told her.

“A well? Horror! That is what I dreamed. I was not asleep, yet I thought I heard a splash, a faint scream. Then silence. *She* must have gone that way. And I—I am meant to find peace there, too. I will go now. I have suffered enough.”

Nathan detained her gently.

“At least wait till I find where that wavering light comes from,” he urged, his voice firm and confident, though his heart was sick at thought of the unspeakable things of this underground world.

He had heard vague hints and vaguer threats coupled with obscene jests and coarse laughter among the soldiers of the fortress. That there were vast, cavernous chambers inclosed in the platforms whereon the palace and fortress stood, storerooms, kitchens, quarters for slaves, armories, wine-cellars, he well knew. A branch of the river Choaspes had been diverted from its course to furnish the many fountains and baths of the palace with water and to refresh with a thousand cunningly contrived rivulets the green gardens where queens, princes, and gayly attired ladies spent their days in luxurious idleness. But this gloomy chamber, this ominous well with its slippery verge and the murmur of water far beneath—did this explain the singular disappearances of which everyone knew and no one dared question?

He grew cold with fear at the thought that he, Nathan, might never be inquired for. It would be supposed by his men that he had been detained at the palace in the further

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service of the prince. The prince would take it for granted that he had returned to the army. The queen and the princess would not give him or his fortunes another thought. Mordecai—and he ground his teeth at the bitter thought—would not be sorry if he never appeared to trouble him again. Besides, the scribe could not by any possibility know of his return. As for Hegé: he clenched his strong hands in futile rage as he recalled the man's repulsive visage and remembered that he had access daily to the presence of Hadassah.

It occurred to him presently that the woman at his side might be able to cast some light upon the dark questions that tortured him. He spoke to her quietly.

"The walls of this room are nothing more than sun-dried brick," he said; "I believe I can make a hole through them with my sword, which they forgot to take from me. The light yonder appears to come through a crevice in the wall. I will presently make it larger, and we shall see if we cannot make our escape from this place, which Jehovah will assuredly not permit to be the tomb of his chosen people."

"Are you also a Hebrew?" asked the woman, "and have you prayed to Jehovah?"

"I am a Hebrew, and I have prayed, like a soldier, with my sword. It has served us well in delivering us from the pit yonder. I shall continue to trust Jehovah and my sword for safety and for much beside. Can you tell me anything of one, Esther, a young maiden, who has lately arrived at the palace?"

"There is a maiden by that name in the house of the women," said the slave. "I have seen her once, when my mistress sent me to her rooms on a pretext to see if she was really as beautiful as Hegé declared. She was more beautiful than any woman I have ever seen; but I did not tell Atossa so; for I loved the princess, though why I know not, save that she looked at me pityingly. I am lame but skilled

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in many things. 'She is not over fair,' I told the queen, 'and she hath a cast in one eye and a mole on her left cheek.' 'Then I will permit her to live,' Atossa said."

"But why is the maiden who is called Esther in the palace?"

The woman sighed wearily.

"I am too faint with hunger to talk longer," she faltered, "but surely you know of the edict of the king. Beautiful women are arriving every day and have been coming for many months past. Every province sends one or two or three, and still the underlings of Hegé are seeking the fairest far and near. There will perhaps be hundreds of them."

"For—what?"

"That the king, Xerxes—may he indeed live forever, for he is pleasant to look upon and his eyes are sometimes kind, even when he looks upon the meanest of his slaves—may choose a wife and queen, in place of the other, Vashti Amestris they call her, who is hated by Queen Atossa."

"And what—will become of those who are not—chosen?" The young man's voice died in his throat as he asked the question.

"Nay. I know not. They will be kept to amuse the queens and the princes and the King's Majesty, perchance. Such persons are taught music and dancing and the art of telling marvelous stories. Sometimes they go to wars with the king. There are many such in the palace, and some have grown old and ugly, and lie among cushions all day fanned by their slaves. They cannot leave the palace, and they die of sweetmeats and sherbets at the last, like overstuffed peacocks. I would rather be a slave and wear the collar of service."

Nathan sprang to his feet, his young blood raging in his veins.

"I would I might pierce her innocent heart with this

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good sword of mine!" he murmured. "'Twere better a thousand times! Curses be upon Mordecai! and upon——"

"Do not call down curses upon anyone now!" entreated the slave woman. "Try instead, and see if you can do anything to save our wretched lives."

She sobbed once in her mantle and pushed him from her with all her feeble strength.

"Oh, if I were a man!" she cried.

The tempered steel of the short Persian sword in Nathan's hand rang softly as it bit into the crumbling brickwork.

"Hush—oh, hush! I think I hear a step!" moaned the crazed creature, who had dragged herself to his side.

"It was but a fragment of the brick falling to the floor," he reassured her. "Here, you can help me by catching the pieces as they fall; spread your mantle—so!"

The girl ceased to sob and shiver as she obeyed him. Something of his determined young spirit seemed to pass into her feeble body, strengthening and calming her.

"Do you really think we can get out of this terrible place?" she asked.

"We can try. And see, it is not going to be difficult to enlarge this hole."

The clear ray of light which now streamed into the dungeon revealed the upturned face of the slave girl in its pallor and emaciation. She was looking up at the stern young figure which towered above her with awed astonishment.

"I know you," she murmured. "You are the Prince of Edom. My father served your father faithfully many years ago in Babylon. I, also, am your servant and handmaid."

She bowed herself before him after the manner of the Hebrews, but after the fashion of the Persians she passionately kissed the border of his mantle.

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“Who dared to thrust you, a prince and wearing the crest of the Great King, into the foul dungeon meant for women who, like myself, have offended some great person.”

“I was put here by the creatures of Hegé,” said Nathan.

He was humiliated by the words of the Jewess, and his angry sword dislodged a great fragment of brick which fell thundering to the floor.

“Hark!” and the girl clutched his arm. “I am sure I heard a step—and voices!”

Both listened, breathless, and heard close at hand a voice saying in the Median tongue:

“I did not break the jar, good Merdasht.”

“You did, slave. I heard it fall.”

The sound of a blow vigorously dealt upon a naked back followed. Then the first voice continued in a subdued sniffing whine:

“Here is the oil-jar unbroken, excellent Merdasht. How then did you hear it fall?”

“Get you to your tasks, fool, and stop your idle clack, or I send you to the scourging-post for a score of lashes.”

Both steps and voices receded, and Nathan looked down at the girl's pinched face with a smile.

“We are just underneath some kitchen,” he hazarded. “See now, I will lift you up, and you shall look into this hole I have made and tell me what is there.”

He lifted the slight twisted form with exceeding gentleness.

“What do you see?” he whispered.

“There is a grating overhead,” she told him, “in the ceiling of some sort of passage, which appears to stretch away off in the darkness.”

He set her on her feet.

“It must be one of the great conduits,” he mused, “which riddle the platforms from end to end like a maze. We will explore it presently and see whither it leads. But

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first, now that we have light, I must needs look at the mysterious well."

"Nay, do not look there!" entreated the girl, casting a glance of frozen terror behind her. "Who knows what you might see? Besides, the door may open again at any moment, and if they should find us——"

"You are right, girl. We must get away as soon as possible, though if we are discovered now that I am unbound and armed it would go hard with the intruders."

The opening in the wall was easily and noiselessly enlarged, and there were neither steps nor disturbing voices from the courtyard of the kitchen overhead. The distant clack of poultry and the sound of spoons beaten hard against metal basins, the odors of smoking wood and cooking food mingled with the cold damp air from the conduit, which now lay fully revealed before them on a level with Nathan's broad shoulders.

"I will lift you up first; then I will follow"; and he swung the slight figure of the girl to the higher floor of the vaulted passage. "Now your mantle—quick! I must cover this hole from the inside so that no one will see it and follow us."

His alert ear had caught the unmistakable sound of the great bolts rasping in their sockets. Some one was about to open the door. And whether it were another victim of the displeasure of Hegé or that powerful official himself, come to deliver his falsely accused prisoner, Nathan dared not wait to discover.

He seized the half-fainting girl in his arms and strode hastily down the long dark passage which appeared to stretch away into the very bowels of the earth.



VIII



HE Princess Amytis, oldest of the four children of Xerxes by his queen Amestris, was now sixteen years old. Too old, in the opinion of the queen, her mother, to be unmarried and playing at ball with her maidens about the palace gardens. She had already been wooed by the handsome Marsenas, heir to one of the seven great principalities, and the Babylonian prince, Nabupaluzar, had asked her as the chief ornament for his house of women. But she had begged leave of her father to remain free—at least till his return from Greece, and Xerxes, loath to give up his favorite child, had consented.

The daughter of the King dwelt in such state at Shushan as her rank demanded. This provided for a separate suite of apartments, an inclosed garden and many young slave girls, whom she selected with capricious freedom from the myriads of slaves and captives ever at the command of royalty. The chief chamberlain, Hegé, whose authority in

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the palace of the women was almost unlimited, she frankly and openly detested.

“ I loath the creature’s creased, white face, like underdone pastry,” declared the vivacious young princess, “ and his mincing walk, exactly like the strut of a peacock. I cannot help laughing to see him going about as if he were lord of the whole earth. He may fawn upon the queens as much as he likes ; but neither he nor his underlings shall come near me.”

And to this she adhered with all the strength of a will and resolution which had descended to her through a long line of warrior kings. When Hegé made his morning rounds of the various abodes of the royal house where the queens dwelt, and of the neighboring and almost equally luxurious dwelling, vaguely alluded to as the House of Lions, he invariably found himself barred out from the quarters of the princess.

“ I can look after the ordering of my own house, and govern my own slaves to my liking, without your assistance,” she said pointedly, and the royal chamberlain cringed before her imperious will like a whipped cur, as was his custom also in the presence of Atossa, mother of the king. Nevertheless he hated both women and bided his time with the cruel patience of his sort.

Having thus boldly emancipated herself from the jurisdiction of the chief authority in the women’s palace, Amytis took unheard of liberties in the place. She came and went as she pleased about the long corridors ; visited such gardens as she chose, peeped into many places closed to the curious, and, in short, conducted herself in a manner forbidden by authority and custom to an unmarried woman, and with a freedom which courted comparison with that of Atossa, over whom, indeed, there appeared to be no law, either of king, potentate, or eunuch.

“ You are overbold, my child,” complained Amestris,

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who had been completely cowed by her own unfortunate experience. "A woman must ever obey, asking no questions, thinking not for herself. Take warning, child, by my misfortunes, and do not offend anyone—least of all Hegé."

To this advice the willful princess had merely tossed her head. "I am not afraid of that horrid, fat old man in his odious, hot-looking, red clothes," she said. "And I have no husband—as yet—to bow down to. When I do, he must be as handsome as my father—or as that soldier who brought my brother back. I could have loved him; and if I loved a man I should not mind obeying him."

Amestris uttered a shocked exclamation. "It is not proper for a child to talk of such things as loving one's husband," she murmured. "What can you possibly know of love? And indeed, child, I would that you never loved. 'Tis better not. Now, I——"

But the princess sprang up with an impatient laugh. "Nay, my mother, I know all that you would say. I must go now and see if my maids have fed my pet nightingale, and if the water lilies are open yet. There is a pink one in the basin of my fountain which showed its color in the bud yesterday."

She sped away, laughing at her escape from one of the tiresome homilies of the queen, who in these days harped unceasingly upon a single theme, worn trite and dull, like an oft-repeated melody in a minor key.

Amytis was not unaware of the labors of Hegé in these days, pending the return of the king from the wars; and though she had been strictly forbidden by her grandmother, Atossa—to whose dictums she had from childhood paid a perfunctory obedience—to visit any of the young girls who were gathering from near and distant provinces, nevertheless her curiosity had more than once got the better of her discretion, and she had caught stolen glimpses of beauties, dark and fair, being taken from their litters in the great

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courtyard of the palace. The long corridors were alive with their slaves and attendants, coming and going with trays of food, baskets of fruit, and jars of scented wines. And from veiled doorways the curious princess could not help hearing sounds of girlish laughter, or wails of homesickness and futile anger.

There was a vast deal of ceremonial observance to be gone through with these maiden aspirants to the Persian throne; to wit, perfumed baths, and anointings with precious unguents, cunningly compounded in the secret laboratories of the palace from cinnamon, frankincense, spikenard, myrrh, cassia, gum styrax, saffron, cardamon, wine, honey, and divers other ingredients, famed for the delicate beauty which they imparted to the complexion. There were costly scents in alabaster vases, garlands of lilies, couches of fresh-plucked rose leaves, and the daintiest of foods and drinks especially prepared by a staff of skilled cooks. And all these things went on under the supervision of the well-nigh omniscient Hegé, whose authority in the royal house of women was secondary only to that of the king himself.

The mischievous princess, having seen the broad back and mincing step of the court functionary disappear down a flight of steps leading to one of the lower terraces of the palace, paused before a curtained doorway.

"Is your mistress within?" she demanded of the Nubian slave girls crouched upon their heels before the entrance. The slaves stared at her between bobbing obeisances.

"Her name is Esther, is it not?" repeated the princess with an imperious gesture. "Answer me."

One of the girls instantly disappeared within, and Amytis, half repenting her boldness, was on the point of turning away when the curtains parted and an old and very fat woman appeared.

"Who are you?" she asked, speaking the Persian tongue with a strange foreign accent.

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"I am the Princess Amytis," answered the girl with pride. "I go where I will, and see whom I please in my father's house."

The woman bowed respectfully, her quick eyes noting the purple border of Amytis' tunic, which none but queens or the children of the Achæmenidæ might wear.

"May it please the Princess Amytis to enter," she said. "My mistress is greatly honored."

Amytis passed in quickly, her garments rustling on the marble floor. She found herself upon a terrace very like the one which fronted her own apartments, save that it was smaller; a flight of marble steps led down into a green garden, gay with flowers, and the columns which supported the fretted roof were twined with fragrant vines and climbing roses. Rich tapestries fit for the royal house itself, were looped back from the broad, carven doorways, and a pile of cushions covered with Persian needlework of birds and flowers were heaped in careless profusion upon the silken rug of Shiraz at the verge of the terrace. Amytis glanced quickly about, her bright eyes taking in all the details of the quiet, shaded spot; then a little cry of surprise and anger burst from her lips, and she ran down the flight of steps into the garden. There was a fountain, with a single delicate jet, in the midst of a thick circle of blue flowers, and upon the surface of its basin rocked two or three magnificent blossoms of the rare pink water-lily of Damascus, for a single plant of which Amytis had given the biggest pearl from her necklace.

As she bent over the flowers, inhaling their delicious perfume with vexed wonder, she heard a soft footfall on the flags at her side and looked up to meet the dark eyes and smiling glance of a maiden no older than herself.

"They are very beautiful, are they not?" the newcomer said in a tone of soft surprise.

Amytis calmly swept the stranger from head to foot with the keen glance of her blue eyes.

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"You are that wonderful Esther, I suppose," she said, her curiosity satisfied at length.

"They call me Esther—here."

"Have you another name, then?"

"Once I had; but it is forgotten."

"Let us sit down in the shade of this arbor," proposed Amytis. "I wish to look at you close—you are so much taller than I. There—now I shall ask you questions. Do you know that you are very beautiful?"

The dark maiden blushed and looked down. She had heard little else of late, and she feared lest she might grow vain and light-minded, as Abihail continually warned her, and so lose favor in the sight of the unseen Elohim, God of the Hebrew people, to whom she prayed fervently night and morning.

"Beauty is vain, and favor is deceitful," she murmured, quoting from the words of an ancient Hebrew writing.

"Oh, no, it is not. Beauty is quite the best thing in the world—for a woman. I am beautiful, myself; but not so beautiful as you. I think I shall forgive you for the lilies."

"For the lilies?"

"Yes, the pink lilies there in your fountain. I thought I had the only ones in the palace; but I see I was mistaken. I suppose Hegé stole them from me for you. He is sly beyond anything—that creature. I should be afraid of him if I did not hate and despise him so heartily. Nothing can hurt one, if one despises it sufficiently."

"You mean the chief chamberlain, I suppose."

Esther spoke slowly, her sweet voice holding inflections of wonder, while her wide, dark eyes dwelt on the vivacious face of the girl at her side.

"He has been most kind to me. I—I think I could not dislike him, because of his kindness."

"But you despise him, of course. No one could help doing that. But let us not talk of Hegé. It might bring

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him hither. Tell me about yourself. What do you do all day in this pretty prison?"

Esther sighed and looked thoughtfully away to the rim of purple mountains, which could be seen between the thick boughs of myrtle and rhododendron.

"It has seemed a long time since I came here," she said at length. "It was summer then, and there has been a winter, and now it is spring once more. I have learned many things, though, since I came, and one cannot be wholly sad when one is growing in knowledge."

Amytis burst into a ringing laugh of amusement.

"Nay, you talk as wisely as the Hebrew scribe, Matacas, who sometimes writes letters for my grandmother. One can see that you must have been taught many things besides the weaving of garlands and a pretty taste in engraved gems."

Esther had fixed her large beautiful eyes upon the princess with almost pathetic earnestness.

"Then you know Morde—the scribe Matacas?" she asked.

The princess shrugged her slim shoulders. "I have seen him," she said, indifferently; "but he does not write letters nowadays. My grandmother was very angry when they sent Ezekiel, another Hebrew, to her yesterday. But it seems my father gave the keeping of the seals into the hand of Matacas, so he could not come. But tell me, what have you learned since you came to the palace? Can you play on the harp? Can you sing love songs and tell stories?"

"I can do none of these acceptably, I fear," and Esther hung her dark head, "but I have learned some beautiful verses in the Persian tongue." She repeated, softly:

"Praise we the all-wise God, who hath made and created the
ages;

Praise him who in the heavens hath sown and hath scattered
the seed of the stars;

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Praise him who moves between the three ages that are, and
have been, and shall be!

Praise ye him, all his angels. Praise ye him, all his hosts!

Praise ye him, sun and moon; praise him, all ye stars of
light!"

The girl's rich, musical voice faltered and ceased, while
a frightened color crept into her pale cheeks.

"That is a hymn to Ahura-Mazda. I learned it once
when I was small," said Amytis, "but the last lines sounded
different to me. Perhaps I have forgotten, though. Now
I must go, and I may not see you again."

Her blue eyes grew sober as she gazed at the pensive face
of her companion. "Who knows," she added under her
breath, "you may not always be so dull."

She drew her veil of white and violet tissue about her
shoulders and again bent forward to study the exquisite face
of the stranger.

"You have not told me anything about yourself, after
all, and I meant to know everything. Where did you come
from?"

"I was born in Babylon, Princess."

"And who named you for Ashtoreth, the queen of love
and beauty, the star among lesser deities?"

"One who loved me."

"And whom you loved?"

The maid who was called Esther bent her head so that
the curious princess could see only the tips of her curling
lashes and the downward curve of her delicately modeled
features. She did not answer.

"Who sent you here to the palace?"

"I cannot answer. I have been forbidden to talk of my-
self."

"By Hegé, probably. Well, perhaps it is as well. The
very walls have ears, they say; and strange things happen to

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strangers who are indiscreet. But you need not have feared to tell me. Farewell, and remember that I have forgiven you the lilies. I had thought at first to pull them from the fountain; but after I had seen you, I could not find it in my heart to make you weep."

The warm-hearted princess held out her hand, and Esther took it in both of hers, bowing over it and touching it timidly with her lips.





IX



HE resplendent luminary of Asha-Vahista must have been in the ascendant in the horoscope of Amytis, princess of Persia, that day, for she met with still another adventure ere the sun dropped behind the mountains. In her own garden she reigned paramount, directing the labors of the Nubian women, who, under her sole direction did most of the work of the place. In imitation of a more famous Babylonian garden she had created there a maze of rose-embowered walks, in the secret depths of which fountains played in the midst of a grotto, marble-walled, where at noon of the hottest day one might rest in solitude untroubled by the heat or the clouds of midges which sometimes arose from the hidden pools beneath, to the discomfiture of fair ladies and bold warriors alike.

It pleased Amytis to be quite alone in this sylvan retreat during the long hours of the afternoon, when Mithra rode high in the heavens, smiting the green earth with his golden

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arrows. Unlike most of the Persian royalties, she had learned to read in her early childhood, and the parchments and tablets which she kept in her rooms, locked away from the meddling fingers of her maids, held many a curious writing from the *Zendavesta*: Gathas, or songs of the ancient religion, and the purer hymns of the cult of Zoroaster; these sufficed to solace many an hour which would otherwise have been wasted in the luxurious idleness enforced upon the royal women. Amytis had gathered her superior knowledge, as she did many other things, by sheer force of a keen intellect and a mind too active to be satisfied with a multiplicity of garments and jewels and the various fancies in pastry and confectionery which occupied the attention of the other female inmates of the palace. From Matacas, the Hebrew scribe, she had obtained many of her parchments; others had come to her through channels little suspected by the lynx-eyed eunuchs whom she so openly despised.

On this day the murmur of the hidden fountains and the twitter of birds in the thickets had lulled the princess into a waking dream, wherein she beheld the beautiful foreign princess, as she chose to call Esther, repeating the Zoroastrian hymn of praise to the All-wise, Ahura-Mazda. She had been reading the scroll, puzzling over its lines written in close cuneiform, to find the unfamiliar words Esther had introduced into its stately cadences.

“She has another god, and other hymns of praise were in her mind,” concluded the princess, and wondered idly whether it were the powerful Mithra, or Armaiti, the serene angel of the earth, who ever converts deserts and wildernesses into fruitful fields and gardens. Amytis often prayed to this benign presence, who, with Vayu, the wind, made of her garden a paradise wherein she could give herself to those deeper reflections which often lie beneath the surface of the most brilliant and artificial life. It seemed to her that sometimes at dawn and at sunset she could almost hear the stir

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of the unseen garments of the benign goddess as she passed among the flowers. And the blossoms shook out a sweeter fragrance as Vayu breathed upon them.

Amytis told no one of her pretty fancies, nor of how, in secret, she dropped innocent kisses upon the satin curve of a rose-leaf, feeling that so she approached most nearly the exquisite, unseen life that dwelt beneath. That she was akin to this life—a part of it—she also realized vaguely, with a dreaming adoration of the mighty Spirit, the Holiest, the Father of all truth, the Master of purity, Ahura-Mazda!

Sometimes she went to the temple with the queens and the wives of the seven princes; but even the stately ritual of the priests, the solemn chanting, and the white-robed processions failed to stir the deeps of her nature as did the unfolding of a lily, the curve of a spray-wet fern, or the humble grace of a hairbell, growing in a crevice of her hidden grotto.

Dreamily she read aloud from the scroll spread upon her knee, her voice blending with the subdued murmur of the fountain:

“ Water, and the center of all pure waters, given of Ormazd, purest Lord of the waters;

Water, that refreshes all things; that causeth the grass to grow upon the mountains, and lilies to bloom in the deserts;

Water, that quenches the thirst of the body, and the ever-increasing thirst of the spirit; I call upon thee and invite thee!

Souls of the righteous and pure; they whose spirits partake of the nature of the all-wise Creator, I call upon and invite you!

Upon Ahura, symbol of the One greatest in heaven and upon earth, and upon all the stars, the works of Ormazd; upon Sreosha, the shining messenger of the Highest, I call!”

As the last syllable fell from the lips of the princess she heard a strange sound—a sound which appeared to come from beneath her very feet.

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“ Help! Help! in the name of the All-merciful! ”

The maiden dropped the scroll and started to her feet. Had the hidden waters, so long prisoned beneath the marble, heard the words of her mystic invocation? Were they yearning for deliverance?

These ancient songs were very powerful, she well knew, and a superstitious shudder passed through all her limbs. Then she gathered her girlish courage and bent to the earth from whence the voice had appeared to arise.

“ Who are you who call for help in the name of Ahura-Mazda? ” she asked. “ Speak again, I entreat you! ”

A deep hollow groan answered her. Then the bronze grating into which the overflow of the fountain perpetually dripped shook violently.

Amytis knew that a single scream would summon a host of slaves and eunuchs to her assistance; but some unseen presence appeared to lay the finger of silence upon her lips. She bent once more over the grating.

“ Whoever you are, answer at once. If you need help, I will help you. ”

“ Can you—open? ”

The princess stooped and laid hold of the metal ring that formed the top of the grating; it was the custom of the gardeners to lift this from time to time in order to remove the clogging leaves which would otherwise stop the flow of the water into the underground channel. Amytis knew something of the great branching system of conduits beneath the palace platform, by way of which slaves had more than once escaped from the wrath of their masters.

Her terror left her, as she reflected that after all she could instantly hide herself in the intricacies of the maze; her love of adventure, moreover, which met with but infrequent indulgence in her guarded life lent zest to her efforts to lift the heavy grating.

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“Push from underneath,” she whispered to the unseen suppliant, “I have released the fastening.”

In another moment the grating was pushed powerfully to one side and the head and shoulders of a man emerged into the open air. To the amazement and undisguised terror of Amytis the head was panoplied in the winged helmet worn by the king’s bodyguard. Then she perceived that the man was ghastly pale and half fainting, and without further reflection, she ran to his assistance.

“There—is—another; I fear she is—dead,” gasped the man. He lifted himself to the edge of the aperture; then stooped, and with the greatest difficulty extricated the limp figure of a woman.

Amytis stooped over the body clad in the mean garments of a slave and dripping dankly with the waters of the underground stream. “She is not dead,” she said, briefly. “Her heart is beating. Wait, I will call a slave and bid them fetch wine.”

“No, do not call anyone, daughter of Xerxes, whom I serve, unless you wish to see us both killed. As you are merciful, wait till I have explained why I am here.”

Amytis stared at him, her face betraying her growing fear and bewilderment.

“You are that Hebrew prince who told us of the army yesterday—or was it——”

“The day before,” he told her. “After the audience I had the misfortune to walk down the wrong corridor. I should have asked a slave, but I did not; and the chief chamberlain—Hegé, they call him—discovered me upon forbidden ground, and——”

The princess knit her brow; her blue eyes flashed angrily. “Did Hegé dare to lay hands upon one of my father’s Immortals?” she asked. “I will tell Xerxes of this when he returns, and that odious Hegé shall suffer for it.”

“He meant to force me to the inglorious death of a

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slave, Princess, and that without reason; but can you not do something for this poor slave girl, whom I found half dead in the dungeon?"

Amytis turned, her finger on her lips.

"I would do anything to vex Hegé," she said, "but I cannot think what is best. You must not be seen in my garden; that is clear."

She raised her eyes to the tall guardsman, a rosy color flooding her white skin.

"I will fetch a flask of wine and some food to this poor girl here, and when she has revived somewhat, I will take care of her. But you—nay, stay where you are. I must think further."

The princess ran lightly away, and Nathan stooped over the fainting girl, who had begun to moan and stir feebly in the warm, bright air. She sat up presently when she had tasted the wine held to her lips by the princess; and looked about her with a terrified stare.

"Do not put me back in that dreadful place!" she entreated, her dim eyes fastening confusedly upon the violet borders of the princess's gown. "Gracious queen, have mercy upon me! I will never again laugh when you adore the images! I will——"

Amytis frowned. "No one worships images except my grandmother," she said, "and she is old and may be excused for her folly, since she is a daughter of Cyrus. Eat this, and be quiet, girl. No one is going to hurt you."

She stood up and fixed her eyes calmly upon Nathan.

"If my father was here, I should know what to do," she said. "I should go to him, and tell him all that has happened. I always speak the exact truth to Xerxes, and he knows that I do. Hence I am not at all afraid of him, as are many of the foolish women in the palace. But the king is not here, and that odious Hegé——"

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She stopped short, puckering her girlish brows thoughtfully. "Stay, I have thought of something. You shall wait here till night. Then I will show you how to get down to the King's Terrace, and from there you can easily reach the fortress. Till then you must keep very still. If you hear anything do not be frightened, no one ever comes to this grotto except myself."

She turned to the slave girl with the air of a royal mistress. "Can you stand up?"

The slave obeyed the command in the blue eyes by struggling weakly to her feet.

"What are you going to do with the girl?" Nathan asked. "She is a Hebrew," he added, in a lower voice.

"She is very ugly," said the princess, who would have none but comely maids about her own beautiful self. "Why, she is even crooked, and drags one foot."

The slave girl would have prostrated herself, but the princess forbade it with an imperious gesture.

"I shall not on that account give you to Hegé to torment. I shall keep you, if for nothing but to spite the creature."

That night, when the young moon had hid herself behind drifting masses of cloud, the princess returned to the grotto where she had left Nathan.

"Come," she said imperiously.

Without a word he followed her through dew-drenched thickets of roses where nightingales sang, to the balustrade which separated the garden from what was known as the King's Terrace. When they had reached the place Amytis stopped and fixed her eyes seriously upon him.

"They will search for you in the palace," she said. "I heard my brother Artaxerxes ask Hegé for you, and the creature smirked and writhed, as he does always when one of the Achæmenidæ speaks to him. 'The guardsman has

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departed to join the royal forces,' he answered, but I saw his black look when he said it. He knows that you have escaped, and he will kill you yet if he can lay hands upon you. If you do not return to the army it will be supposed that you perished on the return journey; and one soldier more or less will not matter to Xerxes."

"I shall not perish at the hands of Hegé," Nathan said bitterly. "I have other work to do."

The princess looked at him long and earnestly. "You ought to win great renown and glory with the life I am giving you," she said proudly. "See, I will also give you an amulet to keep you from harm."

She flung the links of a slender chain over his bowed head. "If you are challenged by anyone," she whispered, "show this engraved gem. It is the royal lion hunter of Persia, copied from the king's signet. It will safeguard you in the palace, and, if Auramazda wills it, wherever you may go."

Nathan kissed the hem of her perfumed mantle with the air of a courtier.

"May Auramazda and all the gods be gracious to you, daughter of Xerxes," he murmured. "As for myself, I cannot thank you. There are no words in any language at my command sufficient for the task."

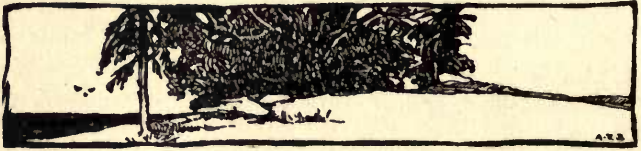
Amytis frowned. "Words are not required," she said, haughtily. "I do this because it pleases me to do it. Go now, and when you have reached the fortress do not delay. Return at once to my father. Quick, now, the guard has passed behind the Hall of Columns!"

She leaned over the balustrade, watching the tall, erect figure of the guardsman as it hurried across the square of moonlight on the terrace below, her heart beating hard against her breast as the watchman's distant footfall approached nearer. Now the refugee had disappeared among the ranks of stately columns which flanked the king's palace;

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in another instant he would gain the stairs leading down to the fortress and be safe from pursuit.

The princess slowly retraced her steps, her fair head bent, her eyes filled with unreasoning tears. In that hour she forgot utterly that she was a princess of Persia and Media, and remembered only that she was a woman.





X



It was more than a month later when Nathan, with the small detachment of guards he had commanded as escort of the sick prince, fell in with the rear column of Xerxes's vast army. The host had marched along the coast of Thrace, across Chalcidice and, skirting the Thermaic Gulf into Pieria, had spread itself over a wide tract of country, one great division keeping to the coast, another, far inland, while Xerxes himself marched with the middle division. Heralds had been sent into all the Grecian states with a demand for earth and water, and most of the continental Greeks had responded with the symbols of submission. There appeared to be slight obstacle between the Persians and Athens, the real object of the expedition. The Greeks still offering no resistance, the Persian army streamed over the Olympic range, marched through Thessaly and finally came to a standstill before the narrow defile of Thermopylæ, where a small force of the enemy was found to be in possession of the pass.

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It was on the second day of the assault that the Hebrew prince, by hard riding, finally overtook his own division of the Immortals. He found the great pavilion of the king set on a small, wooded eminence in full view of Callidromus, the high mountain which, with the sea on the other side, formed a well-nigh impregnable gateway into Northern Greece. Without waiting to rid himself of the stains of travel he at once presented himself before the royal tent.

Xerxes was known to have laid aside much of the ceremony of his court, and so the young man did not prostrate himself when admitted to the presence, but saluted the king as a soldier his superior officer.

The monarch, reclining on a couch of lion's skin, was plucking savagely at the tawny mane of the dead animal while he listened to a report of one of his generals. A large detachment of Medes had just been driven back from the defile with heavy loss, and now the Cissian footmen, celebrated for their valor and success in assault, had been cut in two by the long spears of the Spartans and the no less deadly arrows of the Lacedæmonian and Thespian archers.

"Send in my Immortals," ordered Xerxes. "Nothing can withstand them."

Then irritably he turned to Nathan.

"You bear a report of further failure, I suppose, with which to regale my ears. Out with it, fellow!"

"I bring news of the prince, and of the court, great Xerxes," and Nathan bowed himself before the stormy blue eyes of the king. "I bring also parchments from the Queen Atossa, and from Maticas, keeper of the royal seals."

"Good! What of the lad?"

"May it please the king——"

"It pleases the king to hear what you have to say in as few words as possible."

"The Prince Artaxerxes reached Shushan in excellent

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health, your Majesty, all signs of his disorder having disappeared on the journey."

The king nodded his great head. "'Twas a bitter disappointment to the boy," he muttered. "He had hoped to see the fall of Athens; but who knows if ever we reach Attica? Here I wait, gnawing my beard like an idle slave, while a handful of beggarly Greeks holds the pass against my myriads. By Nabon and Bel, I could tear down yonder mountain with my naked hands!"

"There is another path, by way of the gorge of the river and across the mountain, if my Greek guide is to be believed," said Nathan quietly.

"Another way? Who says so? Let the fellow be fetched. If he lies, I will have him buried alive."

"My life is of little value to myself, and less to thee, O Xerxes. Let me take my own company of Immortals, hardy mountaineers all, and hazard the pass under cover of the darkness. The guide of whom I have spoken has not lied to me once during the weeks he has been in my employ."

Xerxes stared meditatively at the bold speaker.

"You are right. No man's life is of value to me. I must have Athens—otherwise I am not lord of the world. Nevertheless, I am curious to hear why you care not to live. You are young, and you wear the king's crest."

A bitter smile curled Nathan's lips. "It is already twilight," he said. "Shall I remain to relate a long story of love and hate, or shall I win the key of Attica for the king?"

Xerxes smote his knee. "Go," he said, "and Serosh go with you!"

Whether or no Serosh, the tall, the strong, the swift messenger of Ahura-Mazda, God of the Persians, accompanied the Hebrew, the Greek shepherd who played the traitor to his country that night led a picked band of the Immortals along the steep goat-track which wound through

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almost impenetrable thickets up the precipitous gorge of the Asopus.

"If you are leading us into a trap, Greek, be assured that you shall die before we do," Nathan told the guide.

And the man answered, "Pallas be my witness! I have nothing to lose which is of value to me. My son was put to death by the soldiers of Leonidas, because the lad attempted the defense of his flock against their rapacity. The boy and the flock were all I had in the world; both are gone, and I am no longer a Greek—only a man desiring revenge and death."

Both revenge and death were allotted to the Greek right speedily. A thousand Phocians had been sent to guard the gorge, but these, hearing the stealthy movements of a great band of armed men, retreated a hundred paces to a spot where overhanging rocks appeared to offer a better position. It was intensely dark and their archers launched their shafts at random in the direction of the enemy. One of these arrows sought the heart of the Greek, and he fell dead in his tracks, having earned for himself undying ignominy in exchange for the revenge he had courted.

As the gray daylight struggled through the overhanging foliage of the trees, Nathan could see the massed forces of the Greeks in the pass below. Followed by his Immortals, he ran rapidly down the steep path onto the plain below and closed in upon the devoted remnant of the little Greek army from the rear.

All Hellas gained great glory on that day, and the echoes of spear and shield have gone down into history with the untarnished glory of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans, who died, to a man, in the bloody defile.

But at evening, Nathan, prince of Edom, sat in his tent, his head bowed upon his breast. He had won a great victory for the foreign king he served, and the camp was ring-

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ing with his name; but he was sick at heart with the sights and sounds of barbarous war, and no pure memory of a faithful love came to cheer him as he listened to the groans of the four hundred Theban prisoners who were being branded with red-hot irons as the property of the Persian monarch.

His servant lifted the curtain of the tent and stood before him. "The king asks for you, master and prince," he said, "but you have neither washed nor eaten since the battle."

Nathan looked down at his blood-stained garments with a gesture of loathing. "Bring me water," he said, "and I will wash, but how can I eat, who am of all men most unhappy?"

The vision of Hadassah, caught like some bright, wild bird in the hopeless captivity of the royal house of women, seemed always to haunt him. Then the insolent bulk of Hégé came before him and he ground his teeth in futile rage. Yet he could not be unmindful of the shouts that greeted him everywhere along the way from his quarters to the pavilion of the king. And the wine of glory stirred his pulses to a stronger beat. He would save her yet, he promised himself, or die in the attempt.

Mardonius, the chief in command under the king, acknowledged his formal salute with grim formality. He could not bring himself to join the acclamations of his soldiers to this prince of a captive race. But Xerxes greeted Nathan with the bluff heartiness he could assume when he chose.

"By great Mithra, Prince, the sight of you is pleasant to my eyes. 'Twas no empty boast of yours yesterday; and that mountain trail has served us better than my bridge on the Hellespont, or my canal through Athos. Nathan—do they call you? You are a man who brings things to pass! We need such near us. Mardonius, this is the new Com-

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mander of the Immortals. He is a catapult that even mountains cannot stop."

The king's jubilation seemed justified by the great results of the victory; the pass at Thermopylæ was the one gateway into upper Greece, so narrow that the Greeks might well hope to hold it against any odds. But Nathan's bold move had dislodged the enemy, and now the Persian host pressed through and poured like a relentless river into the Bœotian plains. Before it lay defenseless Athens, Athens, the hated enemy that had thwarted Darius at Marathon; that had for years fomented discontent among the Greek subjects of the Persian crown in Asia. Soon it would be at the mercy of Xerxes to do with as he willed. And even his Greek allies trembled to think what must befall their beautiful city at the hands of the merciless Persian. But the Greeks were resourceful; and if their army was broken there remained their fleet to reckon with.

During these days of delay at Thermopylæ, the comparatively insignificant squadron of three hundred Greek triremes gathered at Artemisium had dauntlessly faced the Persian fleet of twelve hundred ships. The Persian admiral, over confident in his superior numbers, had detached a force of two hundred vessels to sail around the island of Eubœa, and attack the Greeks in the rear. The enemy learned of this move, and commending the flanking division to the scant mercy of the Ægean, closed at once with the invaders. For three days the fight raged along the shores of Artemisium. The sun was darkened by clouds of arrows; the roar of the sea drowned in the shouts of combat, the clash of steel and the crash of splintering oak, as the keen iron beak of ship after ship sought its quarry in the flank of some luckless foe; the sea and shore were strewn thick with wrecks and corpses. And still these two armadas, manned by the dominant races of two opposing civilizations, fought on.

Xerxes paced his tent in wrathful impatience as mes-

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senger followed messenger with fictitious reports of success which the continued fighting branded as false.

"May a thousand devils fly away with these fellows!" he cried, as the day lengthened with no decisive dispatch from his admiral. "Cannot our sailors sweep away this rascally flock of sea peddlers? I would, Mardonius, that you or our catapult here were with our fleet. But hold, this fellow by his looks brings news of import. Quick! Let us have it."

Mardonius opened and read to his royal master unwelcome words. The fleet dispatched to outflank the enemy had been stormbound and dashed to ruin on the rocks; while the Greeks, after learning of Thermopylæ, thinking further resistance at Artemisium unprofitable, had sailed away leaving forty shattered ships behind. The royal fleet had lost two hundred triremes.

The wrath of Xerxes flamed up past all control. "Are my soldiers all women, then?" he cried as he glared upon his attendant generals. "With twelve hundred ships they should have crushed the enemy as I crush this parchment!" and snatching the writing from the hand of Mardonius he crumpled it within his great fist. "Will none of you do anything but stand and gape? What have you to say?"

Mardonius, accomplished courtier as well as warrior, and not unused to such exhibitions of royal displeasure, proceeded to reassure the king as best he could.

"The King's Majesty," he said weightily, "has overlooked the fact that, although the enemy have retreated before your majesty's forces, they have not altogether escaped us; and also that their losses are heavy. We were unable rightly to maneuver our ships at Artemisium, but we will attack the miserable remnant of their fleet on waters of our own choosing. It will serve us to press on to Athens before they recover from panic. With their chief city de-

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stroyed, they will have nothing left to fight for, and will become subject to your royal pleasure."

The advance was ordered with all possible haste. The king's anger against the Athenians grew shortly into fanatical hatred, as he noted the temples which arose on every hill, enshrining the statues of their many gods; and upon these he vented his fury. The temple of Apollo at Delphi was especially marked for destruction, for he had been told that the Greeks directed their movements by responses from its sacred oracle. It was rumored, also, that vast stores of gold and gems lay hidden in its treasure chamber.

A large detachment was dispatched to plunder it while the army pressed toward the capital. The second evening following, as Xerxes sat resting in his pavilion, while Nathan with other officers of the guard stood near, a horseman spurred through the camp, and seemingly regardless of any challenge dashed up to the royal tent and flung himself at the feet of the king.

"O king, live forever—I bear evil tidings!" he cried, and overcome with fear, lay trembling on the ground.

"Speak, fellow, if you have tidings, tell them, good or ill."

"My Lord King," said the unhappy man, "the force sent against Delphi is overwhelmed; the gods of Greece fell upon us in a great storm of lightning and hail, while the very heavens bellowed with their war shout."

"And you have come hither to tell us of this *thunder-storm*? By my sword! you shall shortly visit the limbo of these pagan gods! What of my soldiers? Did the hail kill them all? If they be of thy sort, I am well rid of them."

"My Lord King, the remnant will soon be here. I out-rode the others to bear the tidings to the king."

"You have borne your last message, knave, save as you carry the curses of Xerxes to Apollo and all the other Olympian deities. Away with the coward. Let him never be

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heard of or seen again!" and willing to hide his rage and mortification Xerxes retired within his pavilion.

Unmoved as the king and his generals might appear, the army was an easy prey to superstitious fears. The Greek mercenaries, of whom there were many thousands in the camp, gave credulous ear to rumors of ghostly warriors led by the angry Apollo, while Mars and even Zeus himself were said to be directing the forces of the enemy. Little by little disintegrating terror crept through all the Persian host.

An oracle brought back to Athens from Apollo's shrine at Delphi had said that the Greeks should save themselves by wooden walls. And according to their several interpretations of this oracle, some had fled to the forests on the neighboring mountains; others had taken refuge on board the fleet; while a devoted remnant of a firmer faith and courage had remained within the ramparts of the Acropolis, where they fortified themselves behind walls of wood. And here again, as at Thermopylæ, the millions of Xerxes stood helpless before the dauntless courage of a few. Day after day was wasted in vain assaults, while the king raged at his delayed vengeance like a baited lion.

The Acropolis, crowned with its fortress and many temples, towered ninety feet above the plain, its summit accessible only by means of a narrow and precipitous path.

"We waste ourselves here, Mardonius," Xerxes said to his general, after repeated bloody repulses of his best troops. "It is useless to send these fellows of the plain up that height. Try our Median mountaineers, for, by Ormazd! they could scale the very walls of Shushan."

"My Lord King," replied Mardonius, "I have already so ordered. Even now your brave Medians are charging the height."

The king stared eagerly at the thin line of mountaineers creeping up the steep pathway. The leaders were

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quickly overwhelmed by showers of stones and arrows from above; still the unwavering line crept upward. The first to reach the wooden ramparts were seized and hurled headlong, but still the line advanced. Advanced; gained a foothold at the top, and before the defenders were aware of the new peril that threatened them, the whole rampart was in a blaze. Driven back by the flames, the Greeks were forced from their defenses, and with shouts of victory, echoed by the great host in the plain beneath, the Medes swarmed over the barrier and captured the garrison.

With the Acropolis, the last defense of Athens had fallen, and Xerxes gave free rein to his vengeance, sweeping away temples, palaces, porticoes and houses before the fiery besom of his destroying wrath.

While the Persian king thus glutted his vengeance upon Athens, the Greek fleet in full retreat before the pursuing triremes of Persia had retired from Artemisium and gathered in the Bay of Salamis, while the invaders halted off the coast of Attica, a few miles away, their thousand great ships riding proudly at anchor as if only awaiting the royal word to engulf the paltry three hundred vessels of the foe.

In the Greek fleet confusion reigned. Several commanders, thinking chiefly of their own cities, desired to sail away to their protection; while others saw no hope save in a courageous meeting of the enemy with a united force. To these Salamis appeared the place and the present the time to give battle.

Artaphernes, the Persian admiral, was walking the deck of his great trireme when an officer approached.

"Admiral, we have taken a deserter from the enemy who gives important information. Will you see him?"

"What need of more information? They but wait the hour of our decision. To-morrow, it may be, we will destroy them."

The inferior officer hesitated. "The enemy, it appears,

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are on the point of sailing," he said. "To-morrow, the fleet may be gone, and our quarry escaped."

The Greek was at once ushered into the admiral's presence, and his skillful story accredited as being quite in agreement with the facts. Thereupon an instant move was ordered, by which the only outlet from the Bay of Salamis should be occupied and the enemy cut off from flight.

Xerxes, informed of the sudden turn matters had taken, ordered his pavilion to be erected upon the hill overlooking the bay, and at dawn, escorted by his guards, he ascended to it with a magnificence aping the glory of the sunrise just breaking over the hills of Greece. Seated upon his silver throne, he looked proudly down upon the scene before him.

The little Greek fleet, like a crouched animal, lay huddled near the opposite shore; while the bay and the straits as far as the king's eye could reach gleamed with the white sails of his war vessels.

As the Persian ships moved forward to the attack, the Greeks at first retired a little as if terrified at the dreadful odds; then suddenly, under full power of their oars, darted forth to battle, which at once raged fiercely along the whole line.

But notwithstanding the immense superiority of the Persian force and the desperate valor of the men who fought under their king's eye, the tide of battle rolled steadily toward the monarch's silver throne. His ships in the front line were being driven back before the fiery attack of Athens and of Sparta, while the Persian ships in the rear, crowded together and unable to use their oars to maneuver, soon became entangled in a helpless maze, upon the outskirts of which hovered the swift enemy, now and again swooping upon the doomed vessels with the deadly precision of a hawk upon its quarry.

As the king gazed with anxious eyes at the doubtful conflict, a great trireme from whose masthead streamed a

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long crimson pennant darted across the more open water, a Greek ship in hot pursuit, and steering straight for a galley whose broadside lay toward it, dashed with sharp iron beak upon its exposed quarter, splintering the long oars, crashing through planks and timbers, and throwing it helpless on its beam's end.

Almost instantly, it seemed, the sailors and galley slaves were seen pouring like ants over the side of the doomed vessel.

Xerxes leaned eagerly forward. "By all the gods of war!" he cried to Nathan, who stood beside his throne, "a deadly thrust and a daring one! Who fights like that, noble captain?"

"By the pennant, 'tis the ship of Artemesia, queen of Cappadocia, my Lord King."

Xerxes drew his black brows together with a thoughtful frown. "I thought it my admiral's own galley; but, whether his or another's, a better attack was never made. 'Twould seem my women fight like men to-day, and my men—like women."

Fortunate was it for Artemesia that distance and the confusion of the dreadful scene blinded Xerxes to the disgraceful truth. For, hard pressed in the fight, the warlike queen had turned to retreat; but finding herself hotly pursued by a swift Greek galley, she had treacherously rammed a Persian trireme in order to deceive her pursuers and throw them off her trail.

This traitorous blow and cowardly flight of the great woman warrior let panic loose among the Persian ships. Whatever hope of victory had remained to the disheartened captains seemed utterly lost. The royal fleet was hopelessly worsted, and, after a brief struggle, withdrew across the bay, where the shattered ships found refuge under the protection of the land forces in the harbor of Phalerom.

The stars in their courses may not have fought for Greece

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on battlefield and sea, but it may well be that their power was demonstrated in the cowed spirit of Xerxes. He no longer meditated conquest and revenge; his thought was only of retreat and safety.

Yet, could he have believed it, the Persian cause was far from hopeless. His great army had been everywhere victorious; the allies had submitted to his power or had been driven from their territory. Only a small part of Greece remained unconquered, and that might have been wrested from the inhabitants by mere force of numbers. The king's fleet, broken as it was, still outnumbered the enemy four to one. Another battle might have resulted in decisive victory. But Xerxes no longer desired to press his advantage; he thought only of his reverses. He realized his isolation in a hostile country, far from his own capital and kingdom; he feared that the great bridge across the Hellespont would be destroyed by the storms of winter, and himself and his army cut off from retreat. Moreover, his mind was ill at ease at the prospect of a long absence from his capital, ever fertile soil for plots and conspiracies, and he meditated much upon the pleasant life at Shushan as contrasted with the undoubted hardships of the campaign.

His admirals and generals quickly learned his changed purpose and argued against it with what persistence and eloquence they dared. But the royal resolve was taken, and could in this case no more be altered than the laws of the Medes and Persians.

The fleet was dispatched with all haste to guard the bridge, their speed quickened less, it may be, by the king's command than by the Greek triremes which hunted mercilessly in their wake. But the angry Ægean had done what the Greeks could not do, and though cowed by scourging and appeased by gifts and libations, it had risen in its fury and cast off the yoke which Xerxes had vainly imposed upon it.

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The humiliated monarch was at last forced to cross the Hellespont in one of his triremes, and leaving his generals to disband the mighty army, he proceeded with his guards to Sardis; and from thence, with the tardy pace of one who feels that no triumph can await his return, he journeyed to Shushan.





XI



ERXES was striding up and down his great bedchamber at Shushan, the palace, when Matacas, keeper of the royal seals, was announced. The monarch had the look of a sick lion, thought the Hebrew, as he bowed himself with careful observance of the ceremonial etiquette prescribed by custom and precedent. He waited patiently for the king to speak; but Xerxes continued to pace up and down, his heeled shoes smiting the floor, his blue eyes fixed and frowning, his black, shaggy hair flung back from his furrowed forehead. Several minutes passed, during which the Nubian slaves stood motionless at their posts, swinging their great fans; the royal chamberlains remained prostrate in the attitude they had assumed upon entering the presence, and other courtiers in waiting, who had assembled to attend the toilet of the king, appeared to have been transformed into statues of bronze and ivory.

At last Xerxes stopped short. "Out of my sight,

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slaves!" he commanded. "I wish to speak with Matacas alone."

Every alert face instantly vanished, as if the heavy folds of tapestry had suddenly fallen upon and smothered them. The king glanced about him impatiently as if to make sure of this, then he turned to the waiting scribe.

"Come," he said, "let us go out to the terrace; this place smothers me, and the shining eyes and lying tongues and servile backs of my slaves enrage me. Sometimes I could kill them all, from sheer weariness of seeing them always crawling about my feet, and always afraid. Are you also afraid of me, Matacas?"

"You could kill me if you would, Great King, and I am somewhat interested in living," said Matacas calmly. "Nevertheless, I do not find it in my heart to fear you overmuch."

"I knew it, and that is why I have sent for you. There is something about your race which makes you calm, unafraid, not slavish, like the Persians. I have seen it in the Prince of Edom, who has been of use to me in the army. I see it in you. What is it?"

The Hebrew made a gesture expressive of the most profound reverence. "It is because we serve a king invisible, unchangeable, and eternal—Elohim, Lord of all potentates, Ruler of nations, the blessed God, to whom be all praise, and honor and glory!"

"My courtiers praise me in such words, also; yet I have been overborne and humiliated. Listen, for I shall tell you the truth, Matacas. You have heard the populace ascribe victory to me, the king, with great noise of shouting and the abasement of many proud heads, but it is a lie. I know it, and the generals of my army know it. It is true that I destroyed Athens; but all the defenders of the Acropolis had fled save a few fanatical Zealots whom I crucified. It is true that I killed Leonidas, King of Sparta, and nailed his

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headless body to a cross for my soldiers to spit at; but the Spartans held the pass against my hundreds of myriads with but a handful; and at the last I overcame them by stealth and not in open battle. I, Xerxes, have not triumphed gloriously, but am ignominiously defeated. Here at home, too, I am of all men most miserable. A man may not speak against the mother that bore him; but the daughter of Cyrus has reviled me to my face for my failure. As for Amestris, she has utterly changed, and I can no longer endure her bitter reproaches. The love she once bore me appears to have turned to something very like hatred during my absence, as wine resembles vinegar if left too long in the cup."

The low-voiced monotone of the king's complaint had flowed over the Hebrew's bent head like a turgid torrent. But at the sound of the doomed queen's name he lifted his eyes and gazed steadily at the king.

"Vashti Amestris is no longer wife and queen," he said, in a firm voice. The mouth of the king hath spoken it. Why delay longer to fill her place? A wife and queen could do much to comfort the king in this hour of his—sadness."

"Why not speak the word on your tongue, if you fear me not?" demanded Xerxes, with a discordant laugh. "In this hour of my *defeat* a woman, were she akin to my soul, might indeed comfort me. But how shall I find such an one?"

"There are many beautiful women gathered in Shushan for the king's choosing," said Matacas, discreetly, though he was conscious of a great trembling in all his limbs.

"So Hegé tells me; and so, also, I know; but 'tis not beautiful bodies that I require to medicine these mortal hurts of mine. I want—I need—*love*. Do you know what love is, Matacas?"

"Yes, I know; but she—died—long ago, in Babylon; and with her died something of myself. I have not wholly lived since."

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“And such a love as yours, Matacas, I, King of Media and Persia, have never known, can never know. The maidens yonder in my palace, whom Hegé has gathered from every corner of my kingdom and beautified with every art known to his kind, look upon me, Xerxes, not as a man, but as a royal beast, a lion who mercilessly devours their beauty. They fear me; cringe in my presence; tremble in my grasp; their eyes cannot meet mine; they do not speak even save as Hegé has taught them some mincing phrases. They reek of perfumes and glitter with gems like the votive offerings to Mithra we sacrificed at Abydos. How can I love such women? How shall I find among them a queen of my heart and of my kingdom, a woman worthy to wear my heavy crown?”

Matacas had grown very pale; his eyes gleamed strangely under his shaggy brows.

“There is a princess of Babylon in Shushan, who has not yet been presented to the king, who could *love*, if she were wooed by a man and not by a king. She is worthy to wear the crown of Media and Persia.”

“You have never yet lied to me, Matacas. What is the woman’s name?”

“Her name is—Esther.”

Xerxes was silent for a long minute. “I will woo this Esther,” he said, “not as a king, but as a man. If I can win her to my heart she shall be my queen; not otherwise. I have said it. But how to do it? Counsel me further, Matacas.”

“There are many ways in which to win a woman’s love,” said Matacas, slowly. “It cannot be roughly forced, nor yet frightened into being. It grows up slowly and unfolds into beauty even as a rose relaxes its petals to the south winds of summer. Woo the maid gently and in all honor. But first see her. She may not please the king.”

“I will see her, and that at once. Already you have

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cheered me, Matacas, and given me thoughts of hope. Go now, and Ormazd be kind to thee!"

As Matacas passed slowly down the corridor leading from the king's chamber, he appeared calm and grave as was his wont; yet the thoughts burning beneath his severe and tranquil exterior might have utterly astonished the watchful courtiers who marked his departure with jealous or curious eyes.

A man in the gorgeous robes of a privy counselor, attended by pages and slaves, before whom, also, many prostrated themselves in token of reverence, stopped short at sight of the preoccupied face and unbending figure of the scribe.

"Has the Jew, Matacas, become suddenly blind that he neglects the lawful obeisance to Haman, chief of the royal household?" he demanded, with a sneer.

The keeper of the seals lifted his eyes and fixed them calmly upon the arrogant figure of the man before him.

"Since Haman, son of Hammedatha, is aware of my nationality, he cannot be ignorant of the fact that a Jew may not abase himself before an Amalekite," he said, with scathing emphasis, and passed on.

The chief counselor, choking in his beard with rage, swore a great oath by the nine attributes of Ormazd that he would punish the insolent Jew, who, as a captive, was little better than a slave. Then he swept on, followed by his servants, into the presence of his royal master, where he prostrated himself to kiss the floor at the feet of the king. For, unlike the Jewish scribe, he was exceedingly and increasingly afraid of Xerxes.



XII



HE Hebrew woman, Abihail, bearing in both hands a great jar of rose-scented water, paused before the screened doorway leading to the smallest of the three apartments devoted to the use of her mistress. She had, without understanding the reason, grown almost afraid of the girl she had once chided and petted with impartial fondness. Hadassah—or Esther, as she was called always, in these days—had grown very tall and stately, and her eyes, once like the wondering eyes of a little, innocent child, had changed to the eyes of a woman who has thought deeply, and who has therefore suffered.

The old woman coughed discreetly. "May I enter with the water for your bath, Princess?" she asked humbly.

The girl herself drew the curtains to one side. "Come in, good Abihail," she said. "I am glad it is morning, and that you have come. I have not slept since the dark hours of the night. I fancied I heard the sound of revelry, and a great stir of feet afar off, and I—was afraid."

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"What could hurt you here, my lamb?" purred the woman, pouring water into a silver basin. "Come, let me lave your hands and face; then you will be refreshed and ready for what must come."

"What will come, Abihail?"

"How should I know, beautiful one? Suppose it were a visit to a grand garden in which are great fountains, and wondrous plots of flowers, and many singing birds? There are such in the palace, and you have been long a prisoner."

Esther turned very pale. I have never rightly understood why Mordecai brought me to this place," she said, in a low, tremulous voice, "but—sometimes I have longed to be back in the house by the gate, with my pigeons to feed and the little brown birds flying about. You used to scold me then, Abihail, because I burned the cakes in the baking. I think I should like it—to be scolded; and Mordecai—am I never to see him again, who was father and mother alike to one who was left alone in the world?"

"They call him Matacas here," said Abihail, drying the beautiful little hand of her mistress with soft pattings of the linen towel. "He is quite well; I see him often."

"But I do not see him—why?"

Abihail shook her head, eying the face of her charge with sly anxiety. "You have me always with you, and what more can you desire, eh?"

Esther made no reply, but surrendered herself to the skilled hands of the woman with a vague sigh.

"See now, beautiful Princess, I am about to clothe you in the garments which the worshipful and excellent Hegé sent here for your use yesterday. You would not look at them then, because you were reading from one of your scrolls; but you must needs see them now. Come, will you wear the rose color, or this tissue of blue and silver?"

Esther looked coldly at the rich garments spread out for her inspection.

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"I should like best to wear my kirtle of blue and white and the mantle of stuff you fashioned for me long ago," she said, dreamily. "The Prince of Edom thought me fair in them."

She leaned forward and touched the woman gently. "Nay, do not finger those foolish robes as if you loved them; no one here sees me save the birds, and they love me in whatever robe I wear, and—and tell me, dear, good Abihail, have you seen him ever? or have you heard anything about him?"

Abihail pursed up her thin lips severely. "If you are speaking of Nathan, son of Asa," she said, "I can tell you that he has returned alive from the wars, which is not what I looked for."

"He has—returned? Oh, Abihail, did you speak with him? Do you think——"

"I think nothing of that young man, and I should advise you, mistress, to do likewise. He is not for such as you. I saw him talking with a female slave named Dinora, and she gave him a letter, from some woman, I suppose. I saw it with my own eyes. He has forgotten you."

"Forgotten me? That could not be, Abihail. Nathan could never forget me. Does he know I am here?"

The woman held up a sleeveless tunic of exquisite embroidered stuff. "Come, sweet Princess, let me arrange your dress," she said coaxingly. "I did not tell you at the first because I wished to see your surprise and joy; but it is true that to-day you are to visit that beautiful garden of which I spoke. Hegé himself will fetch you there, and bring you back."

"Who—will be in that garden? I—I think you are keeping something from me, Abihail."

"Fear nothing, Princess," Abihail said soothingly; "'tis but a mark of the privilege with which you are treated as the guest of the king."

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"Am I the king's guest, Abihail? But why? I am no great person that the king should so honor me."

"You are a princess of Israel, hence worthy of all honor." Abihail clapped her hands. "Now your jewels, and all is finished!"

At the signal the seven maids who had been appointed to the service of the Babylonian princess—as Esther was called in the palace—appeared, carrying various articles of the toilet, and gathered about their mistress with soft notes of affection and pleasure. A Greek, with languishing dark eyes and merry lips, threw a net of pearls over Esther's dark hair; another touched her lips and throat with rare perfume; a third knelt at her feet to fasten the dainty slippers with their high golden heels, while others stooped to arrange the diaphanous folds of her long, open sleeves which half revealed the rounded arms beneath. Almost before she was aware of it, the girl stood robed with all the exquisite completeness of a Persian princess.

She turned a face of wistful sweetness upon her attendants, murmuring her thanks for their gentle offices; but her eyes hid a frightened look in their depths that pierced Abihail to the heart.

"Do not tremble so, my lamb," she whispered in the Hebrew tongue. "Jehovah will guard you from all evil."

The girl's face brightened as she drew her slender figure to its queenly height. "I am not afraid," she answered in the same tongue. "Elohim is with me; the God of my fathers will set me on high, because I have trusted in Him."

"There is but one thing wanting, and I will supply it," observed a purring voice from behind.

Esther turned her head and beheld Hegé, the chief chamberlain, standing at her side. Instinctively she feared and disliked this man, though in the perfect innocence of her heart she could not have explained the reasons for her feelings.

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"The mantle," continued Hegé, bowing himself obsequiously in acknowledgment of the timid greeting of the girl, "let it be white, with faint bands of blue, like the sky overhead."

He shook out the folds of a silken garment and fastened it deftly to the girl's shoulders with clasps of pearl and gold. "Spread it out more upon the train—so;" he spoke sharply to the maids. "And now replace the silken girdle with this one, pearl and gold, to match the shoulder clasps. Now a rose—half blown; only one, slave; give it to me; I will fasten it with the art which no other possesses. Ah!"

The great master of toilets and expert in beauty stood off to observe the effect of the changes he had made in the exquisite picture before him.

"The necklace is too clumsy for that slender throat," he observed at length. "Nevertheless, I will not remove it, if you wish to wear it, gracious princess."

"I will wear whatever pleases you, good Hegé," said Esther, in her low, sweet-toned voice; "the necklace is heavy, but my maids put it on me."

"Take it off, and replace it with this," ordered Hegé.

Wonderingly the maids obeyed, their fingers trembling as they touched the great pear-shaped pearl depended from a single engraved emerald of untold value. The gems were held by a slender chain of Etruscan gold.

"You are to be honored by being permitted to visit the king's private gardens to-day, Princess," said the chamberlain, "but—ah—do not disturb yourself, I beg. The king will not be present. The great Xerxes bade me say to Esther, Princess of Babylon, that the gardens are hers for the day. You are at liberty to take any or all of your maids with you."

In the garden which had been built for Xerxes at the east of the royal house, one might forget the world of care and pain and poverty which lay far down in the city streets



"SHE TURNED A FACE OF WISTFUL SWEETNESS UPON HER ATTENDANTS, MURMURING HER THANKS."

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below, and wander at ease, like a soul in Paradise, aware only of peace and beauty. All that the skill and art of world-famed architects, landscape gardeners and florists could do to beautify the spot had been done at enormous cost. Slaves had toiled and died under the lash ere the great stones which formed its unseen foundation had been hewn out of the distant mountains; caravans bearing precious marbles and stuffs had made their way through scorching deserts in the teeth of the deadly sandstorm; travelers had penetrated poisonous swamps, and perished with fever on the banks of lonely rivers to gather the bright exotics and rare lilies that bloomed in many a pool and grotto; blood and treasure without stint had been poured out; groans, tears, the breath of the dying, and the curses of the dead had gone to make a place so fragrant, so calm, so bright with sunshine, so cool with refreshing shadow, so filled with the whisper of green leaves and the murmur of many-voiced fountains, so radiant with the white sheen of lilies and the glory of roses that the girl who entered there cried out with delight and wonder.

“No one will question you or disturb you, gracious Princess; you will go wherever it pleases you within the confines of the garden; refreshments will be served whenever you desire in the pavilion yonder,” Hegé had said. “I will see that you are conveyed safely to your apartments at the hour of sunset. There is a gardener at work yonder among the roses; but do not heed him. He is both deaf and blind to all save his flowers.”

The girl scarcely heeded the parting words of the great official, who had discreetly withdrawn after obeying the commands of the king. She was intent only upon exploring the fascinating depths of the glorious garden which stretched away before her in alluring vistas.

“Oh, come!” she cried to her chosen companions, two pretty Greeks of about her own age, “let us see whither this turfed path roofed with roses will lead us.”

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The gardener who worked among the roses lifted his bent shoulders and stared keenly after the girlish figures, as they passed down the green vista. After a little he picked up his tools and followed them, skirting the soft turf of the path by way of the garden beds across which he strode, ruthlessly crushing the blossoms in his way.

There was a fountain at the far end of the rose walk, throwing up myriad jets through golden-throated flowers wrought of pink marble, and about it were circular benches heaped with many soft cushions; but the girl did not pause to rest; after her long imprisonment, the bubbling life within leaped up joyously like the liberated waters of the fountains. She laughed; she sang; she even gathered up her long draperies and ran, light as a faun, across the velvet turf of a lawn shaded by blossoming trees.

"Let us rest here where we can see the blue of heaven through the trees," she said at last. "How kind of the great king to think of the pleasure of a lonely girl whom he has never seen, and cannot care for. How, suppose you, Rhodaguné, came the king to bethink him that I was weary—oh, so weary of the confines of my little garden, beautiful as it is?"

The Greek girl shook her head. "I cannot even imagine," she said. "But perchance some one has spoken to the king of the beautiful princess, someone who knows how kind, how good, how lovely she is."

Esther sighed. "Do you love me, Rhodaguné?" she asked, gently, "and you, too, Eunice? I am glad, then, for it is better to be loved than to have jewels and beautiful dresses. Nay, there is nothing so sweet in all the world as love."

"Everyone loves you," cooed Eunice, bending to kiss the hand of her mistress. "You never strike us, your servants, nor scream with rage when you are not pleased with your toilet or your food."

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Esther turned her dark eyes upon the girl with a look full of astonishment. "Who could be so cruel as to do such things—surely not a woman?"

"The Princess of Thebes, whose apartments are near yours in the palace, gracious princess, is like a lioness in her displeasure. She struck one of her slaves yesterday with a silver mirror, and blinded the girl, because the slave had lost a jeweled hairpin which she prized. They say the Egyptian will be queen some day."

"You should not talk of such things, Eunice," Esther said, with gentle dignity.

"And wherefore not, honorable Princess? Everyone in the palace is talking of the king, and of his choosing a queen. They say he has already rejected a score of maidens, and one can hear them weeping with rage and disappointment in the little palace beyond the marble lions. They go there to stay always unless their friends are permitted to take them away."

Esther trembled with the vague terror which of late had visited her whenever she turned her thoughts upon the baffling enigmas which surrounded her.

"Nevertheless we will not speak of what does not concern us," she said firmly. "See, we have a beautiful day, all ours, by the kindness of the great king, and we will not think of tears."

The Greek girls exchanged wondering glances. They feared to disobey their mistress, gentle as she was, for an impassable barrier appeared to exist between the beautiful girl and all base or ignoble thoughts. But was it possible that she did not understand her own position in the palace? Had no one told her? They wondered and held their peace.

They wondered yet more when at midday noiseless slaves served a wonderful banquet in a marble pavilion hung with draperies of white and blue. The Greek girls stood on either side of their mistress while she ate daintily of the ex-

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quisite viands served in dishes of gold and crystal. It was all quite incomprehensible; yet they felt sure that something lay behind this show of kingly hospitality, which had not been tendered to any other of the beautiful women who were prisoners of the king's capricious will.

At the hour of sunset Hegé returned but without the curtained litter. "It is the king's will," said this powerful individual, "that the Princess of Babylon shall henceforth reside in apartments better suited to her requirements. I am directed to conduct her to rooms communicating with this garden, which, for the present, will be reserved for her sole use. She will find all her attendants within; also other servants."

Esther fixed her large eyes on the chief chamberlain, the startled color fluttering in her soft cheeks.

"The great king overwhelms me with his gracious favor," she faltered. "I know not how to thank him."

That night Esther slept in an ivory bed, in a room as fairylike in the beauty and luxuriousness of its appointments as the moonlit garden without, where the breath of myriads of roses swept by on every breeze, and the haunting melody of the nightingale filled the night with sweetness and peace.





XIII



FOR many days Esther, Princess of Babylon, enjoyed the wonders of the king's garden and house in such peace and solitude as the increased numbers of her servants and the splendor of her toilets permitted, and always the silent gardener worked among the flower-beds and followed her movements, himself unobserved. As the days passed and the girl became somewhat more familiar with her surroundings, she discovered that new beauties, fresh surprises awaited her with every returning morning. One day, she discovered a flock of snowy doves, which fluttered down at her call to feed from her hand; another day, bands of unseen musicians played ravishingly on stringed instruments; a third day, great stores of jewels were spread out for her choosing; and when she feared to touch them, she was told it was the king's pleasure that she select and wear such ornaments as pleased her best. At every turn she was made to feel the well-nigh illimitable power and wealth of the giver of all that she enjoyed; and

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it was hardly to be wondered at that the maiden's thoughts should turn with more and more wonder and gratitude toward the unseen king, who appeared so deeply interested in the welfare of a stranger.

On the seventh day, as she sat pensively watching the reflection of quivering green leaves in the placid pool of a fountain, she heard a step behind her, and started up in alarm at the sight of a splendidly attired man. Her maids dropped upon their knees with little cries of fear and amazement for they had at once recognized the dark-bearded face and the peculiarly shaped headdress with its spotted fillet of violet and white, worn only by the king.

"Do not be frightened, I entreat you, Princess," said the man, and his voice held a pleading note that touched the girl's heart in spite of her instinctive fear; "and do not kneel to me. I forbid it."

For Esther had sunken to her knees before him, and would have touched his feet with her forehead. He lifted her and stood looking down at her with open anxiety.

"I wished to know—to ask you—as to whether my orders had been carried out. Are you happy here, Princess?"

Esther looked up, and meeting the troubled blue eyes bent so earnestly upon her, replied quite simply, as she would have answered Mordecai:

"I am very happy," she said in her low, sweet voice, "and very grateful to the king."

A flood of clear color rushed into the girl's pale cheeks, as her eyes fell upon the frightened faces of her maids. "I am not—" she began, and stopped abashed. "I know not how to speak aright to the great king. No one has taught me."

"I will teach you," said Xerxes, and smiled, as if well pleased. He motioned to the attendants, and they drew back, out of sight, if not out of hearing.

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"Come, sit here upon the bench, Princess, and do not be afraid of me. I could not bear that, and yet, it is natural."

He spoke as if more to himself than to the maiden.

"It is not usual for a woman of your rank to talk freely with a man," he said, after a silence, "but I desire above all things to be able to talk with you. I wish to know your thoughts. I wish to tell you mine."

To Esther, with her Jewish training, this proposal did not in itself seem astonishing. She had been accustomed to associate freely with Mordecai and certain chosen ones of his friends in the modest freedom of home. To talk to a man, therefore, did not appear to her either strange or impossible.

"The king does me great honor," she said, simply.

"I wish to do you honor, Princess; and in return I beg of you the greatest of all honors—your friendship."

The word was almost unknown in the Persian tongue when used to describe the relations between a man and a woman. But the king used it unhesitatingly. He was bent upon trying an experiment, and one that promised him a satisfaction he had not dreamed of.

"How may I be the king's friend?" asked Esther, her dark eyes filled with pure amazement. "But it is true that I, also, have no friends, and I——"

"You need a friend; I am sure of that; then be mine, Princess, for I, King of Persia and Media, have no friends."

The king's voice held a sadness that his courtiers and counselors had never heard. His pride, they knew; his oftentimes despotic cruelty, they feared; but the lonely soul beneath the royal purple no man, and certainly no woman, had ever yet been permitted to approach.

Esther's quick sympathy was touched. For the moment she forgot that the man who spoke thus despondently was a king.

"I will be your friend, if you wish," she said, in a

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low voice; but her eyes shone with the beautiful tenderness she felt always for every creature that suffered.

"If we are to be friends we must henceforth drop all ceremony, dear Princess," he said, after a little silence. "You must not speak to me—or think of me even as the Great King—nay, I am weary of the title; it means nothing any more, unless I can gain what to me is the whole world."

Again he was silent, his blue eyes kindling with the unwonted thoughts which surged through his brain. He looked earnestly at the girl's beautiful face; but the mere loveliness of its color and outline meant little to him, who for the first time in his life sought the soul beneath.

"Do you think," he went on, "that you can do this? I will see you only here, in this sweet spot, which truly seems a heaven of peace to me to-day. Will you try, Esther?"

At the sound of her new name on the king's lips the girl grew exceedingly pale. "I—I do not understand," she faltered. "I cannot—think——"

"Do not hesitate to tell me what is in your mind," he urged. "Remember you have promised to be my friend, and there can be no love where fear has first entered. See, Esther, this pretty pool that reflects the blue sky and the shining leaves and the white clouds that float far above; your eyes resemble the clear, translucent water, and they are telling me that you do not altogether trust me."

The girl's long lashes fell in startled amazement. "I will tell you the truth," she said at last, her voice low and tremulous. "I wondered—I could not help wondering why the king should care to make me his friend. I am not great, nor rich, nor wise. I am only what you see, a foolish maid, with little wit and less learning."

She bowed her head with a humility which became her as the dewdrop becomes the lily.

The king bent his head toward her with a smile. "I

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also will tell you the truth, Esther; I was ever sad and lonely, for in spite of all that my courtiers say, I have suffered great losses and defeats in the wars abroad. And here at home—" He stopped short, and gazed at the girl with piercing keenness. "You know, of course, that I have been obliged to put away my queen? You have, doubtless, spoken of it often."

The girl shrank from him almost imperceptibly. "I do not talk of the king with my attendants," she said, proudly, "and I have seen no one else since I came to the palace."

"True," murmured Xerxes, "I gave orders that it should be so. Then your maids do not speak to you of what goes on in the palace when they brush your hair or arrange these wonderful toilets?" His eyes glanced at her magnificent dress with a gleam of humor.

Esther returned his look calmly. "The other day, for the first time, one of my maids spoke to me of an Egyptian princess, whom, said they, would be queen."

"And what more did they tell you of the Theban? She is very beautiful, is she not? And very good?"

"I cannot answer the king, for I know not."

"Then you think it nothing that she saw fit to blind a slave with a blow of her silver mirror? Would such a woman be fit mate for Xerxes, think you? Nay, if we are to be friends, why not tell me?"

"I could not love such a woman," hesitated the girl; "but——"

"But you think I might be able to? Was that your thought?"

She shook her head. "I do not know whether kings and queens love like—like commoner folk. It was of that I was thinking."

The king's brow grew dark as midnight. "What is a king, then, that he may not love like a man? And why should you as well as everyone else believe that I am

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incapable of a true and pure affection?" He sighed bitterly.

"I do not believe it," faltered Esther, amazed at the effect her simple words had wrought. "I did not think it, even. I have never presumed to—to think about the—king and his private affairs."

He turned suddenly and took the girl's hand in both of his. "As you hope for happiness, tell me the truth, girl. Do you not know why you are here, in my palace? Has not Hegé or one of your own slaves told you? And observe, I do not even know where you came from. I know nothing of you save that a man whose words I value above most told me that you were worthy of my—of a king's friendship. And I snatched at his words as a thirsting man snatches at a draught of clear water. I think I could not bear it to be disappointed—thwarted of my wishes—*now!*"

Great drops of sweat had started out on the king's forehead; his piercing gaze held the soft eyes of the girl as though he would read her inmost thoughts.

Esther trembled beneath the lightning of his eyes, and a wordless prayer ascended to the God of her fathers. She spoke after a little silence, and the words fell calmly from her beautiful lips.

"I will answer the king truly, as I hope for any happiness—and of late I have hungered sorely for happiness. I do not know why I am in the king's palace. I was brought here many months ago. I have seen no one since save Amytis, the daughter of the king."

He interrupted her with a startled exclamation. "Did the princess tell you nothing of the gossip of the palace?" he demanded peremptorily.

"It pleased the princess to ask me many questions; but we talked chiefly, then and afterwards, of the scrolls containing Persian poetry, and of the flowers that grew in the garden."

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"Auramazda grant that you are telling me the truth," murmured the king, fingering his beard with bent brows.

Esther looked down, her eyes filling with tears.

"I think," she said coldly, "that we cannot, after all, be friends. Will the king graciously permit that I be sent back to my—to the place from whence I came?" She looked at him fearlessly, her dark eyes brimmed with water, which presently dropped off her lashes in two large shining tears.

"What are you saying?" demanded Xerxes, with a frown. "How dare you dictate to me in such bold fashion?"

Then he smote his knee with impatient wrath. "I perceive what you are thinking," he exclaimed; "you mean that you cannot endure to have me doubt your word or your truth. Is it not so?"

"It is true that I thought it. And it is of itself true," the girl answered proudly.

"And by the throne of Mithra you are right, Princess! If you could permit me to doubt you, you were no fit mate for a king who hates and despises a lie."

The girl's startled look recalled him to the significance of his impetuous words.

"I have frightened you by what I said just now," he said gently. "I beg that you will not again think of it, though I spoke honestly, and out of the depths of my heart. But you will be my—friend?"

Esther's downcast face became slowly suffused with a glorious rose, while the loud beating of her heart sang in her ears and shook the silken tissues of her bodice. Of a sudden the fire in the imperious blue eyes of the king seemed to kindle an answering flame on the white altar of her soul.

"I will try to be," she said—and her voice held the solemn deeps of the ages that had been, that were and that were to be—"always and most truly—the king's friend."



XIV



EW in the palace, save his most trusted servants and the erstwhile scribe, Matacas, who was now often with the king in the hours of his privacy, were aware of the strange wooing in the garden; but it could not be hidden longer when, by order of the King's Majesty, the Princess of Thebes together with all the other royalties and semiroyalties lodged in the king's house, were first feasted with unheard of magnificence, then loaded with gifts, and sent away to their respective homes in distant provinces, without once seeing the monarch whose throne each had openly expected to share.

The queen mother, now paramount in authority in the woman's household, had thrice presented herself, it was rumored, demanding audience with her son, and each time she had been refused. The rage of the royal lioness had been fearful to witness, and the slaves and eunuchs who guarded the king's privacy trembled like reeds in the wind, even while they presented an immovable front to her angry demands.

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On the fourth day thereafter the haughty Atossa, reduced to employing milder measures, sent one of her eunuchs to the king with an arrogantly humble request for his company at a banquet to be served in the queen's house.

"The daughter of Cyrus, the wife of Darius, and the mother of Xerxes, prostrates herself before the throne of the Great King, and begs that he will do her the honor of supping with her to-night," were the words conveyed to the king. Xerxes frowned, for he knew right well that the day of reckoning was at hand.

"Tell the queen mother that I will be present," he said, and dismissed the messenger with scant ceremony.

There was much of wearisome and irritating business to demand the king's attention that morning as he sat in his accustomed seat under the vast columned portico. Mardonius, the general whom Xerxes had left in Thessaly with a picked army, informed the king by special messengers of various losses and disasters to the troops under his command, and requested large reënforcements in view of his determination to again occupy Attica. Several maritime provinces which had been greatly depleted in the late disastrous war failed to send their full quota of tribute; a threatened revolt in Egypt again demanded the royal attention. It was broadly hinted to the king in this connection that the unceremonious rejection of the Princess of Thebes might foment the trouble into actual insurrection. The great Haman skillfully represented the cause of the Egyptian aspirant to the throne of Persia, and urged the king to recall his order to the royal chamberlains; he was ably seconded by the envoys of the Egyptian satrap, Meres, who entreated the king to do all in his power to cement the wavering relations between Egypt and the Persian throne.

Xerxes heard them all in stony silence; then he gave a few brief orders to the scribes concerning supplies and forces to be sent to the relief of Mardonius.

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“As for the honorable Princess of Thebes,” he said, “the lady has already left my palace with a large escort of Persian cavalry, which may serve to soothe the fears of Meres. Should it not accomplish my purpose, a second and a third escort will shortly follow.”

At the end of the hearing the king hastily withdrew, leaving various unfinished matters in the hands of Haman, the Amalekite, who, through his superior insight and knowledge of the royal character, had risen to a position of great influence in the court.

On this day Haman had great ado to pacify the enraged representatives of Meres; but he accomplished his purpose at length, when he informed the Egyptians that Xerxes had ordered that each of them should be presented with a thousand gold darics.

“Anything could be bought with the king’s gold,” argued Haman, and in his high office he made what use of it he chose, not forgetting himself and his growing importance.

The Amalekite bore a more lofty front than even his wont, as he passed with his retinue of servants through the Hall of Columns and out upon the King’s Terrace beyond. Queen Atossa had commanded the privy counselor to visit her in her royal apartments, a privilege freely accorded to the mother of the king, but rarely used.

The queen, magnificently attired, sat upon a sort of ivory throne, which she had ordered constructed with a special view of enhancing her fading beauty and lessening authority. Curtains of rose-colored stuff cast warm reflections upon her worn, eager face and thin, restless hands, hands which of late had wasted into the unlovely semblance of talons.

“Tell me,” she began abruptly, when Haman had finished his careful genuflexions before her lofty seat, “you who know the king, who see him freely and in all moods, what is he doing about the matter of the queen?”

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“Surely the divine mother of Majesty cannot be unaware that——”

Atossa struck her staff sharply upon the dais in front of her chair.

“If the divine mother of Majesty was aware of what she wished to know, she would not have sent for Haman,” she said, sharply. “The king has not honored me with his confidence of late. I only know that he has ordered the House of Women cleared of its occupants; and that already workmen are demolishing the place preparatory to remodeling the interior into—what? That is one thing I want to know. Is it not good enough for the creatures that occupy it?”

“I can answer the Queen’s Majesty on that point very exactly,” responded Haman. “The House of Women is in process of becoming the queen’s palace. It must be finished ready for occupancy in the month Tebeth, which is at hand, and on the tenth day; else the hundred workmen, the fifty gardeners and Belnothus, the chief overseer of palaces, will be put to death.”

Atossa sneered. “And what pretty creature expects to occupy this palace?” she asked. “Has the king, then, dared to choose a consort without consulting me? I have selected Artissonna, Princess of Pasargadæ, for him, and she is even now under my protection. I did not permit her removal.”

Haman raised his eyes to heaven as if in amaze at this bold statement. “Is the divine Atossa not aware that the Babylonian princess, called Esther, has been removed to the king’s house, and that she remains there?”

“Remains there—the Babylonian princess! What are you telling me? The woman should have been taken to the House of the Lions. What is Hegé about? I shall call him to account for this.”

“Nay, but, Madam and Queen, I entreat you to remember that all has been done according to the king’s orders.”

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“But not according to precedent of the Court of Media and Persia, and even a king must bow to the customs. Xerxes has forgotten himself strangely. He should not have neglected my counsels, who am daughter, wife, and mother of kings, and whose word is law regarding such matters. And who is this woman—Esther—they call her? She can be no great beauty if she is Babylonish; they are black and ugly creatures. And Princess of Babylon? What means the title? Whose daughter is she? She cannot engage the king’s attention long if she is ugly and unknown.”

“It is said that the king will surely marry the Babylonish woman within the month, most beautiful of all queens.”

Atossa’s angry face did not soften at this empty compliment. She bent forward and stared keenly at the gorgeous figure and sneering eyes of the courtier.

“You have been somewhat successful of late in winning for yourself the king’s favor,” she said, after a short silence. “I have heard much of your unprecedented rise and of your vast influence over my son; but I can tell you one thing, Amalekite, Xerxes would cast you out of his presence like a dead dog if he knew what happened in Ecbatana five years ago. Xerxes despises a debtor, and I believe he would strangle a liar with his naked hands. You are—have been both, and worse, much worse.”

Haman’s dark face had become the color of clay as he listened to these contemptuous words of the woman who bent forward to look into his startled eyes with an ugly laugh.

“Who,” he gasped, “has betrayed me? or rather, what bold person has defamed me? I—I have done nothing that an honorable man may not do.”

“I meet Xerxes at supper to-night,” continued Atossa, drawing back her wrinkled lips over the fine, even teeth which the years had spared her. “Let us suppose that I

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entertain him with the story of Merodach and—No? Shall I not even speak the word?"

Haman had thrown himself at the foot of the ivory dais, and was clasping the feet of the queen in the depths of his abasement.

"Do not," he entreated, "speak further! I am the beautiful queen's slave."

"And as my slave you will obey me? Then find out for me concerning this woman, who contrives to engage the king's fickle favor. I wish to know her origin, her past, everything about her. Do you hear?"

"I hear, great Queen, and from henceforth to hear is ever to obey. I will do what I can; but the king is powerful and I am also his servant."

"If you are not altogether a fool you will find a way to obey me and serve the king, too," Atossa said sharply. "Go now, and do not return till you can tell me what I would know."

That night the Queen Atossa entertained the King's Majesty at supper, and she did not, on that occasion, stint her hospitality nor her smiles. Magnificently attired, she had yet permitted her gray hair to remain ungilded, and no cosmetics had been used to restore her faded and pallid face to a lurid semblance of youth. The result was astonishing in the extreme; Xerxes stared at his mother with real anxiety.

"You are ill, Queen and Mother," he said. "Why have I not been informed of this before?"

Atossa sighed profoundly. "It has appeared impossible for me to engage the king's attention during the past days," she said plaintively. "Thrice begged I his attendants to admit me to the private garden of the king, a spot heretofore always open to the king's family; and thrice baseborn menials have dared to bar the portals in my very face. Tell me, O Xerxes, was this your wish? Do you then desire to

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subject the mother who bore you to insult and the derision of slaves?"

Xerxes swore by all the gods that he did not, plucking savagely at his great beard, as he was accustomed to do when his passions were aroused.

"Then you did not order the doors of your garden shut against me?" persisted Atossa, herself filling the king's gemmed goblet to the brim with an especially strong and delicious wine made in her own vineyards at Helbon.

"It is true that I ordered my gardens closed against all intruders," the king said, evading her searching gaze. "But I did not intend to insult my mother—Auramazda forbid!"

"Why, then, could I not enter? What could have transpired within that sacred inclosure which was forbidden to my eyes? Nay, do not answer me; for I perceive that I am despised, cast aside; forgotten, even as an outworn garment; but it will not be long that I shall trouble you, my son! I, who have thought of naught but thee through a long and weary life, am about to pass into the silent land of the invisible gods. My breath will soon be taken away, and there will be naught left to the king of her who set him upon his father's throne, at the very risk of her life, save cold and empty clay!"

The queen's reference to the troublous times which preceded the succession of Xerxes to the Persian throne was not without its wonted effect upon the king. He breathed hard and murmured a pious wish for the queen's preservation.

"You have forgotten, perhaps, that Artabaganes, the eldest son of your father by a baseborn wife, would have put you to death when you were a child had not I stood guard over you like a lioness over her cub," Atossa went on, with a dramatic uplift of her still beautiful eyes. "It was I who pointed out to Darius that you were the son of the king and doubly entitled to occupy the throne, since through me you

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continued the blood of the great Cyrus. That you live; that you are the Great King, you owe to me, and to me alone!"

The king's head sank forward upon his breast. It had been the habit of his queenly mother to refer to his early and vast obligations to herself in the most poignant terms; but never before had he looked upon her gray hair, and her pallid and sunken features wrought upon his generous and impulsive feelings as the astute queen had foreseen. He bent forward and, taking her thin, white hand in his, lifted it to his lips with the new gentleness love had taught him.

"Ormazd forbid that I should ever forget any slightest duty and obligation to you, my mother and queen," he said in a low voice. "Tell me what I can do to make you well and happy, and I will do it to the half of my kingdom. For there is no one whom I so reverence, and to whom I would more willingly do honor."

Atossa sighed and hesitated, with the air of one who has ceased to be interested in worldly things.

"The king, my son, has not yet deigned to taste of my poor vintage," she murmured at length. "Drink, my son, and let your heart be uplifted, for the thing that I shall ask of you is a very little thing, and does not involve the giving up of a province or of any power. But first, drink, I entreat you!"

He raised the golden goblet to his lips; but the queen observed with displeasure that he scarce tasted its contents.

"Alas! I perceive that you do not like my wine, the rich vintage of Helbon," she said sharply. "I had it expressed and ripened for the use of the king alone. Meaner lips shall not quaff it; but if it please not the King's Majesty, I will command it to be thrown into the river with the slaves that made it; perchance the gods will not disdain the offering."

"The wine," said Xerxes, with a deliberate gentleness

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new to him, "is excellent, but I shall not, on that account, allow it to confuse my mind. I wish to give my entire attention to the matter you require of me, Mother and Queen. It is, you say, a small thing; if this be so, rest assured that you shall not long wait the gratification of your wish."

"A little thing, a very little thing," repeated Atossa, with an artificial smile. "But we have been too serious, son of mine, at this my banquet. If I must die soon, I would at least be merry while I live. See, here are the dice in this cup of emerald. Let us now make a jest of my request. We will throw, and if the king wins thrice, I will not beg of him the small, the very small favor I have in mind. But if the gods grant me grace and I win, the king shall give me his royal promise to do as I shall ask, and grant me the trifling favor which I will then present before him."

The king's hand had already grasped the cup; for he dearly loved the pastime of dice throwing; then he paused, hesitated and slowly set it upon the table.

"Come, excellent Majesty, throw, and let us see what is the will of the gods," said Atossa, concealing her eagerness under a show of careless mirth; "Is it the king's pleasure that I throw first?"

"We will not throw the dice till you have explained to me your wishes," the king said, slowly. "I like not to make promises when my brain is fogged with wine, nor yet to stake my honor upon the chance throw of the dice. Such unthinking pledges have cost me dear in the past, and of this the Queen's Majesty cannot be unaware."

His words were cold and measured, and Atossa perceived with rage that he was not to be entrapped into compliance by any of the usual easy methods she had counted upon.

She picked up the dice cup and hurled it passionately upon the floor.

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"I will tell you what I demand of you," she said loudly. "And observe that I say *demand*; for it is of my right and privilege that I shall be consulted in the matter of choosing the queen and consort of the king. You have a Babylonish woman shut up in yonder garden of yours—nay; do not deny it. I have sure knowledge of the fact. And this, of itself, does not greatly interest me. You may select from the common herd what creatures you will for your private amusement; they do but swell the retinue of my slaves when you have cast them aside. But you shall not set an unknown woman above me, the thrice royal Atossa. And this I swear by all the attributes of Ormazd! I swear it! I swear it!"

The voice of the aged queen had risen to a shrill scream; her thin hands shook; her eyes glared with uncontrollable rage.

The king sprang up from his place, his features black with anger.

"If you were any other save my mother," he said, in a low, hardly controlled voice, "you should die, and that within the hour. "Listen, woman; you have insulted the Majesty of Persia; you have insulted the queen to be, and you have blasphemed the name of the All-wise, since you know not what you swear. Go to your women and let them give you a sleeping potion. You are not fit to speak with me further."

But Atossa had clasped his feet with wild entreaties for pardon.

"Look upon my gray hairs," she sobbed, "and judge whether I would lightly speak evil of Majesty! Do not leave me, my son; but tell me, I entreat you, of this woman, this queen to be, as you have called her. See, now I am calm, quite calm and reasonable! Do not leave me to eat out my heart in loneliness over your harsh words. Ah! I knew you would not refuse to listen to my prayers."

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The king had raised her gently and replaced her upon her couch; but he still towered above her, dark and threatening as a thundercloud, while she babbled weakly of her love for her son, of her adoration of his majesty, of her entire willingness to be subject to his will."

He stopped the flow of half-insane ravings with a peremptory gesture.

"I have this much to say to you, Queen and Mother," he said coldly. "I am about to marry Esther, Princess of Babylon; and I shall also place upon her head, in the sight of all my court and of the princes and governors of my provinces, the double crown of Persia and Media. For this is my royal will and pleasure. And to you I say further, who are more powerful in my house than is perhaps safe and best, that if but a hair fall from the head of my chosen queen, and that loss be traced to you, you shall die the death of a slave, were you thrice my mother and the veritable foundation of my throne."

Atossa stared at her son with wide blue eyes out of which every trace of expression save that of terrified submission had faded.

The king looked down at the woman's white face, and a gentler expression stole over his harsh features.

"Mother," he said, and at the tender word his voice shook with emotion, "when I was but a little lad I used to—*love* you. And you, despite your soaring pride and well-nigh boundless ambition, loved me. Is it not so?"

The woman eagerly murmured her assent.

"If I had not loved you, would I have risked life and happiness for your sake?" she again reminded him.

"I am well assured of your devotion," he told her; "and so I hope you will understand me when I tell you that I *love Esther*. She has risen, a beautiful star of hope and joy, upon the black night of my ruined life. For, mother, king though I am, I have not been a happy man. You mar-

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ried me in my early youth to Amestris; and I was true to her, though she was little more than a beautiful, soulless child in those days; and since has changed evilly to an unlovely similitude of wrath and sorrow. I know now that I never loved her. She was not worthy. But I love my queen, my wife that is to be. And for the first time in my life I am happy. I came here to-night prepared to tell you this; but you—nay; I could not. Will you grant me your good wishes, mother?"

Atossa raised herself upon one elbow and regarded her son with the steady malevolent gaze of a tigress about to spring upon its prey.

"The king does me great honor," she murmured. "Nay, I could scarce have dreamed of such a tale of conquest over a royal heart. 'Tis vastly entertaining, I swear; let, I pray you, the bards and singers of Persia be summoned forthwith to weave this—this pretty idyl into song, that all the common people may hear thereof and rejoice. But surely great Xerxes does not expect that the seven hereditary princes and the governors and chiefs of the army, whose daughters he has cast aside without ceremony will unite in the praise of this—this woman—this unknown and unheralded Princess of Babylon!"

"I have twice told you whom I shall crown as wife and queen," said the king, coldly. "I will tell you once again, since age appears to have dulled your senses; the maiden's name is Esther."

"The maiden's name is—*Esther*," repeated Atossa, with sneering emphasis. "And who—if the king can inform me—is *Esther*? Of what nationality is she? For many nations gather in Babylon. Who is her father? Who her mother? From what palace did she come? Answer me, my son, as you will be forced to make answer to your people on the day of your espousals."

"I will not answer you, woman; nor shall I be forced—

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as you dare to suggest—to answer any subject of mine who shall presume to question me concerning my choice of a queen. It is enough that I love her, and that she—God in heaven grant that I be not deceived in this!—loves me.”





XV



ESTHER, the elect lady and queen, chosen by the most powerful monarch in the world, to be the sharer of his throne and the mistress of his heart, stood like any commoner maid of Shushan before her mirror, her eyes filled with tears of perplexity. She

had been brought to realize at length and little by little the dizzy eminence upon which her royal lover had placed her; and she longed, womanlike, for some one to scatter the many fluttering fears and anxieties which thronged her mind. Abihail, the ancient serving woman, had been mysteriously removed from her person, since her arrival in the king's house. And of the crowd of servants who surrounded her night and day, obsequiously ready to obey her slightest wish, not one appeared to Esther in the guise of a friend. In the eyes of her household she was already the queen, and waited only the priestly ceremonial which was to conclude the weeks of hurried preparation carried on by hundreds of persons under the severe and critical eye of Hegé, to become the crowned consort of Xerxes.

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Her maids had just finished dressing her, and one by one had withdrawn, leaving only the black fan-girl who stirred the warm air above her head with noiseless motions of her gilded palm leaf and the chief tiring-woman, who lingered to bestow the final touches upon her mistress's toilet. This person, a dark, smooth-voiced Greek, soft fingered, gentle as a caressing breeze and of a soothing tranquillity of manner, had not been long in the service of the queen to be; she had appeared one morning among the other women in waiting, and had at once taken command with an air of almost insolent authority. It soon appeared, however, that she was high in favor with the almost omniscient Hegé, and no one of all the others durst question her position.

The Greek woman peeped over the shoulder of her tall mistress as she restored a jeweled pin to its place, and perceiving the shy sparkle of a tear on the dark lashes, spoke in a soft, crooning voice.

"Something troubles the beautiful queen," she murmured. "Tell the humblest of your servants, I entreat you, what it is, that she may hasten to amend the matter, if it be possible; for my hands, my feet, my tongue are at the unquestioning service of the Queen's Majesty."

"Do not speak to me thus," Esther said, with a look of displeasure. "I shall be queen only when it has pleased the king to set the crown upon my head; as yet, I am but—a Princess of Babylon."

The slight—the very slight—hesitation in her mistress's voice did not escape the watchful Greek.

"It may be," she said smoothly, "that the worshipful princess misses the delights of that palace in Babylon from whence she came?"

Esther did not reply, and the woman, after a discreet pause, continued:

"The chosen queen, great and almost above mortal weakness as she has become, may yet miss the caresses of a

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mother, or the tender solicitude of a father. Am I right, beloved mistress?"

The gentle tears which filled the girl's eyes fell down her face; but she turned from the woman with shy dignity.

"I do not wish to speak of my home or my friends with anyone," she said firmly. "They remain ever shrined in my inmost thought, sacred to me alone."

"But assuredly the near relatives and friends of the queen will be among the thrice-honored guests at the approaching feast of the coronation?" persisted the Greek, with a searching glance at the beautiful, downcast face of the princess. "It could not be otherwise."

"I—I cannot tell. It may be so," murmured Esther, her thoughts upon Mordecai. "But I fear I may not see him, even if—" She stopped short, and turned quickly to the woman. "My veil and mantle; I wish to go at once into the garden."

As she descended the flight of marble steps which led down into the leafy recesses where alone she found the solitude and tranquillity so necessary to her peace, the girl became aware of the Greek tiring-woman still close behind her, in company with two eunuchs wearing the rich liveries of the king's house. She had grown somewhat accustomed to the continual espionage which has ever been the price of the royal estate; but to-day the attentive eyes and the ever-listening ears of her attendants irked her. She longed above all things to be alone with her thoughts for the little time which would elapse before the king's daily visit.

"You may go back," she said, in the gentle voice her servants loved to obey. "I wish to be quite alone."

The Greek lifted her brows and hands in mute amazement, as she stood at the top of the steps watching the tall, stately figure of her mistress pass down a liliated vista of the garden.

"Who ever heard of a royal princess who wished to be

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quite alone?” she muttered in the attentive ear of one of the men.

“A royal princess?” echoed the eunuch, with a shade of emphasis in his question. “Is our beautiful mistress, then, a royal princess?”

The woman looked down demurely. “If the astute Hatach knows not, how should I guess?” she replied.

Hatach knows no more than—shall I venture to whisper it—Hegé,” said the man, with a quick glance behind him.

The Greek pursed up her full lips unbelievably. “Nay, I cannot believe that Hegé does not know everything concerning our sweet mistress.”

“And Hegé knows no more than”—the man bent forward to whisper in the pretty little ear turned toward him—“does the king.”

He laughed triumphantly at the unfeigned amazement in the round uplifted eyes of the woman.

“And I may say to you that I myself know quite as much as does the King’s Majesty,” he went on, with a conceited twist of his effeminate head. “But I do not tell all that I know—ah, no; Hatach is wise as the wisest, and knows right well that the way to eminence at court lies here.”

He tapped his tightly closed lips with a jeweled forefinger, and winked and grimaced at the woman with a show of preternatural intelligence.

“I might be able to throw a light into this dark corner if I would,” murmured the Greek, examining her delicate finger tips with the air of a great lady. “In the bath and at the toilet it sometimes pleases even a queen to babble of herself to her attendants.”

“Ah! then our princess has told you all about herself?” the man’s voice was sharp; his watchful eyes suddenly keen and piercing.

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"I did not say so," laughed the Greek. "I said merely that——"

"You need not repeat your words," her companion said sulkily. "I do not think you know even as much as I do. I witnessed the arrival of the princess at Shushan."

"Her arrival—*you?* nay; I cannot believe it!" The Greek drawled out the words with careful deliberation. "You know what they are saying in the palace?"

"They, if you mean the courtiers and slaves, say many things, mostly foolish. For my part, I believe only what my eyes tell me; it is the one way of wisdom and—mark me well—safety, in a palace."

The fellow swelled out his little chest and strutted up and down with the preposterous air of a peacock.

"Then you do not believe that the princess was first discovered in the heart of a monstrous lily bud which opened by night in the midst of the king's garden? Yet it is a pretty enough tale."

The man cackled with derision. "Good! very good!" he exclaimed, slapping his thigh. "Yes; that was quite the way of it. A bud, a gilded bud, which opened by night! Yes; I may assure you, and the princess stepped out, clad in robes of blue and white and silver, a dazzling vision of beauty. Hegé and all the chamberlains had been summoned. 'Who are you?' said the great one, bowing himself quite to the earth before the vision. 'I am Esther,' said the princess. Good! very good! For once the palace gossips are right."

"Then you believe that she is divine in her origin?" The Greek gazed at the man with an engaging air of simplicity and candor, which caused the lackey to indulge in a paroxysm of silent laughter.

"Good—very good!" he managed to ejaculate. "You have grasped my inmost thought; the princess is of divine origin; she is here by the grace of Ashtoreth, the goddess

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whose name she bears. She will presently be queen. What more is there to be desired?"

The Greek appeared to be turning over the words of Hatach in her mind. When presently she spoke it was with a gravity and decision which eliminated further jesting from their conversation.

"I know quite as well as you that our beautiful mistress arrived unannounced at Shushan in the dead of night, in a gilded litter borne by four Nubians. But tell me this: *why did no one torture the slaves into telling where she came from?*"

"Oh, as to that, most incurious of your sex," sneered Hatach, "I have the pleasure of informing you that the Nubians had been deprived of their tongues at some previous period of their existence; a barbarous practice, is it not? Yet useful, exceedingly useful when the tongue of a slave becomes somewhat objectionable by reason of its peculiar office."

The woman cast a furious glance at the eunuch. "Fool!" she cried. "I spit upon you and your veiled threats!"

The person who was called Hatach stood quite still on the steps of the terrace after the angry tire-woman had left him; he was, apparently, amusing himself by gazing at the antics of a pair of gorgeous rose-colored cockatoos, which danced impatiently upon their perches, calling and screaming discordantly. After a further period given up to a seemingly aimless survey of the sunlit garden, he deliberately descended the steps and walked quietly away among the blossoming shrubs.



XVI



O not answer me, beloved, if my questions give you displeasure. I care not for rank or empty titles, since I shall bestow the highest. That I have found you, and that you *love* me, this it is that fills me with such amaze I scarce can think of lesser matters. Yet you will not misunderstand me, beloved, when I tell you that my heralds must needs know all your names and titles, that they may publish our espousals from the rising up of the sun even to the going down of it."

The king's blue eyes were set with open anxiety upon the downcast face of his promised queen.

"But first tell me once again that you love me, Esther," he pleaded in a low, passionate whisper; "for I hunger and thirst for loving words, who have been ever starved and cheated."

The girl raised her soft dark eyes to the fiery blue ones of her lover.

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"I can scarce believe that it is given to me to quench the king's thirst, to satisfy the king's hunger, yet with all my heart I tell thee that I love thee; I shall always love thee."

"Beloved queen of my soul, who will to-morrow be queen also of my realm, I worship thy pure loveliness with a heart that is weary indeed of that which is not pure. Yet of that hidden past of thine I am somewhat jealous. Tell me, sweet, whence came you to my palace?"

A painful blush overspread the maiden's face. She longed to tell the king all her innocent past; yet in that moment of love's temptation she remembered again Mordecai's solemn exhortation at parting: "To no one reveal thy birth or the circumstances of thy nativity. Thou wilt receive a new name. Be known only by that name in future. On thine obedience hangs thy life, thy fate—and mine." And she had promised in the vaguely realized presence of Elohim, the majestic God of the Hebrews, to obey him. Ah, if Mordecai but knew of the love of the Great King; of the deep confidences with which he had honored her; of the wonderful gentleness of his eyes; of the tender respect of his love, would he not release her from that promise made so long ago?

She looked again into the king's eyes; and her own were clear and untroubled; yet they plead with the question she could not evade.

"The king loves truth not better than his handmaid," she began.

But he checked her with a caress.

"Nay, you are my queen," he said proudly.

"Not always did I enjoy the state and title of a princess," she said slowly, feeling her way with care between the strait promise that bound her and her passionate wish to open to his eyes the hidden pages of her white life. "Yet I am of royal blood."

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“From what king art thou descended, matchless one?” he asked.

But to this quite natural question she would give no answer.

“I lived ever a quiet life, close guarded by one who was kind to me,” she faltered; “I came to Shushan, not of mine own will, but at the command of another. More than this, I may not—I dare not tell—even to the king. Oh, beloved, do not doubt my truth because I may not tell thee all!”

The king had risen and drawn the slight figure within the strong circle of his arm. He was of a majestic height, and the dark head of the maid reached no higher than his great shoulder. He looked down at her with exceeding tenderness.

“Beloved,” he said, and his voice shook with the strong beating of his heart, “Beloved star of my soul, I have already staked my happiness, all the happiness I shall ever know, upon your perfect truth. Tell me this one thing, for this I must know beyond a peradventure: have you loved any man beside me?”

And she answered him truly, with all her woman’s soul in her eyes.

“I knew not,” she said, in a hushed voice, “what love was until thou didst teach it me.”

He held her close for a minute, and she heard the sound of his great heart beating in her ears, while her own leaped to meet it, in that silent communion of spirit which no words can measure.

After a little he spoke.

“I shall tell my heralds,” he said, “to proclaim *Esther* Queen of Persia and Media. There can be no name above that name—*Esther, Star of Love!*”

Then he bent his proud head to look into her eyes. “Does the title please my queen?”

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Her lips were tremulous as she made him answer. She could not know all the thoughts of his heart; but she saw suddenly and with an almost aching clearness of vision his amazing faith in herself, and it made her both afraid and ashamed.

"May I ask a boon of your love?" she said timidly, after she had uttered such sweet and innocent words as her heart prompted.

"A boon—nay, a thousand! You have asked nothing of me all these days, though I have urged it often. Ask of me all that thou wilt, for I and all that I possess are most truly thine."

"There is in the palace a—a very wise and learned person—a scribe," hesitated the girl; "I should like to speak with this man alone, if I may."

The king frowned. "Have you, then, letters to be written?" he asked. "And may I not know the name of this scribe, who is thus honored by my queen?"

"His name is Matacas," said Esther, her voice trembling more and more. "I—he taught me—formerly in—my home. He was—a friend—a—counselor. I trusted him."

The man at her side grew exceeding thoughtful. So Matacas knew something of the hidden past of this wondrous maiden, this pearl among women, whom the king had indeed found worthy of his love, and he had not seen fit to reveal it. The mystery baffled and angered him, as did all mysteries.

"I hate intrigue," he muttered, to himself rather than to the maiden, "and what this sealed scroll signifies I cannot tell. But, no; there can be nothing here of mystery save a divine mystery of sweetness and life. And what find we else in the rose that springs out of the dark earth, we know not how? Yet we gather it without question, and enjoy its perfumed beauty without suspicion. You shall talk with Matacas whenever it pleases you, beloved. He is the wisest

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man I know. I esteem his words far above all that priests, counselors, and warriors have been able to tell me. It was Matacas, sweet, who told me that you were in my house. To him we owe the bliss that has been ours, and the greater, the more exquisite happiness we are yet to taste. I must leave you now, my star; but I will have Matacas sent to you without delay. And to-morrow, beloved, to-morrow, you will be mine!"

Esther sat motionless upon the marble bench where he had left her, listening to the proud tread of her lover's re-treating feet. Even his walk was kingly, she thought, with a tender pride in his complete mastery of her. Then she gave herself to delicious reverie, wherein the king ruled and dominated every innocent thought; his great stature, his broad and muscular shoulders; his stern aquiline features; the soft fire of his blue eyes beneath their black brows; his thick, dark hair, like the mane of a lion; the deep, resonant murmur of his voice, all seemed present to her loving fancy. Ah! she must fear him, she knew, like all the others, who appeared paralyzed into breathing statues at his approach, were it not for his love. And to think that this mighty monarch, this king among men, loved her! Her breath came hard as she remembered the sacred sound of his great heart beating against hers. Her sweet, yet terrible future loomed so near that she hid her eyes before the dazzling sight of it.

"Make me worthy of the great happiness thou hast bestowed upon me, O thou great Jehovah of my people!" she whispered, clasping her small hands in an ecstasy of petition. "Protect him, I entreat of thee, Elohim! and help me to think aright, to be always worthy of his great love; for I am but a weak and foolish maiden, and know not how to walk as a wife and queen. Thou, O Holy One, has set me upon this mountain peak; let me not fall and perish, I beseech thee, for truly I fear my great happiness and the glory of

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the crown which to-morrow the king shall set upon my head. But thou canst help me! Thou hast said, 'I will not leave thee nor forsake thee,' and in thee do I put my trust!"

The soothing murmur of the fountain seemed to repeat the tranquilizing words over and over again.

"I will not leave thee nor forsake thee!"

Esther listened, her tumultuous thoughts growing calm once more. She would see Mordecai, she reflected joyously. He would surely release her from her promise, and since he was the king's friend, he would himself tell the king all her story. And with the thought her memory returned once more to those earlier days, when she had lived the simple, industrious life of a Jewish girl under the close guardianship of the wise, the loving Mordecai, and of Abihail, who alternately caressed and chided her. She wondered what had become of the woman, and resolved to ask Mordecai to restore her to her place as chief tire-woman. Then the dark face of the young Hebrew prince arose before her in dreamy reverie. He had loved her most truly, and now for the first time she understood what love was, and a throb of sympathy and pity for the loveless prince shook her heart. When she was queen, she promised herself, she would befriend her fellow exiles, and especially would she remember the man who had first called her Esther. She had not expected to be so called in the palace; but when, on the night of her arrival, they had demanded her name and title, she had answered with the one Persian name which came to her mind; and later, at the suggestion of the far-seeing Hegé, she had added the further title, which in a manner belonged to her truly, Princess of Babylon.

How long she sat there half reclined among her cushions she did not know; the minutes fled soft-footed, sped by love and happiness; but after a little she became aware of a pair of burning eyes fixed steadily upon her. With a cry of alarm she started to her feet and faced a man who slowly

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advanced to meet her from under the shadow of a low-hanging rhododendron tree.

"I have been long watching you, Princess; and if your looks belie you not, you are happy; though I had pictured you distraught and lonely like myself amid all the splendor of your surroundings."

"Nathan!" breathed the girl, her startled eyes wide with mingled gladness and fear.

"Yes; it is I, Nathan. Are you glad to see me?"

"Yes; oh, yes! But how came you here? I—I think I am afraid for you!"

"Be afraid rather for yourself, woman, who hast become a gilded toy in the hands of an Eastern voluptuary. I would have killed you whilst yet you were pure and unsullied, whilst you loved me, had I known the terrible fate in store for you."

"I—I never loved you, Nathan."

"You did not? Nay; you did love me once—*once!* But now——"

He threw up his hands to heaven with a gesture of passionate appeal. "I call Jehovah to witness that I loved you even as my life, and that you——"

"Stop!" cried the maiden, pale and resolute. "Call not Jehovah to witness to an untruth. I loved you—yes; but even as a child feels a tenderness for a beloved playmate, as a maiden loves purely the son of her mother, so loved I you; but in no other way. I love the king. I shall be his wife."

"Esther! Esther! is this the truth? Nay, it is impossible! The king but plays with you. Soon you will be cast aside like those other unhappy ones, who drag out a miserable existence in the House of Lions. Let me take you away from this terrible place! I love you. I have always loved you! I will snatch you from him yet. Were he thrice the king, I would cheat him of his prey. Esther, beloved!

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Listen to me—as you love your own soul, as you reverence the memory of your mother! I will save you!

“You are mad, Nathan! Back! You shall not touch me. To-morrow I am to be crowned Queen of Persia by the hand of the only man I have ever loved.”

The Hebrew prince staggered back as if he felt the sword at his breast. “I—I— It cannot be true! Mordecai deceived me—lied to me. Listen! Esther; you must listen to me, whether you will or no; you shall listen. Mordecai——”

“Who speaks that name in these royal precincts?” a deep voice broke in. “I am here to answer for myself.”

The tall, imposing figure of the scribe strode forward and caught the half-fainting girl in his arms.

“What do you here, Nathan, in the king’s most sacred privacy? Go at once ere your life be forfeit to the king’s displeasure!”

The unhappy young man faced the scribe haughtily.

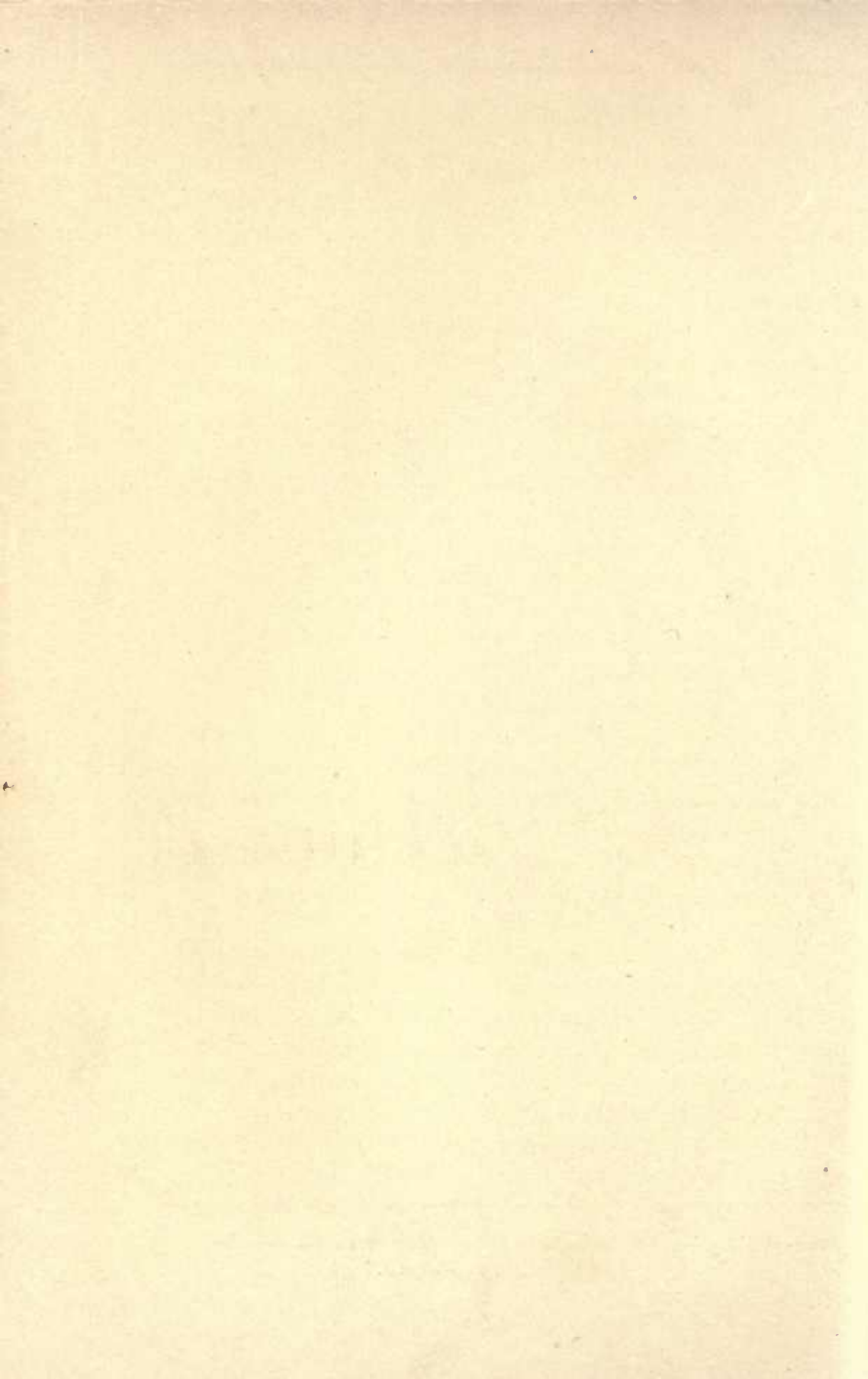
“I might ask the same question of you, Mordecai; what are you doing in the king’s garden? You, who are more false than death. You had this—*this* in mind when you put me off a year ago. You doomed her to this gilded ruin! You made of her, a princess of the royal line of Judah, a plaything for Xerxes!”

“You are mad, boy! It is true that I brought this, my kinswoman, to the palace. But how hath Jehovah blessed my action! This maiden will to-morrow be Queen of Persia, and do you—you, a captive of a despised race, kneel to her in all reverence. She, and she alone, may be able to succor us in that hour of dire peril even now threatening like the thundercloud which lies below the horizon on a fair day in summer, big with fiery destruction and ready to work havoc at the urge of the unthinking wind. I see many signs and portents of the times unperceived by others, and I know that the day approaches. Go now, and leave us!”

Esther had hid her face in the mantle of Mordecai,



“XERXES SET HIS IMPERIAL CROWN UPON THE HEAD OF ESTHER, AND PROCLAIMED HER HIS WIFE AND QUEEN.”



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whose sustaining arm yet supported her; but she raised it and turned her soft dark eyes upon the man who had sunken with bowed head at her feet.

"Go," she repeated in her sweet, shaken voice, "Go—and peace go with thee!"

Slowly he arose and without raising his haggard eyes to the beautiful, pitying face of the maiden, slowly retreated, to disappear at length among the trees.

"How came that rash soldier hither, child, to destroy your peace?"

"Nay, I know not. I cannot even think. The doors are doubly guarded by the soldiers of the king, and my attendants shut out all intruders."

"I was admitted without question because I bore the king's signet, and because the king had ordered the guards to admit the man who bore it. I must look into the matter."

"I would not that he entered here; and yet I could not help being glad to see him—at first."

"Glad, my child?"

"Yes, Mordecai. He was dear to me in those sweet days of the past, and I would that he might be ever near me as a friend and brother."

"That may not be, child. You know that now. As the king's wife all ties that bind you to the past must be broken."

"Ah, do not say that, dear Mordecai. There is naught on my part of which to be ashamed. And 'tis of this I would speak to thee. Let me, I pray you, tell the king all my story. He has asked me, with his own lips he has begged me to tell him of myself. But, bound as I was by my sacred promise to you, I could not."

"Then you have kept your promise? You have not told the king?"

"I have not told him. And he trusts me. Oh, Mordecai, if you could but know the half of his love for me!"

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“And do you love the king?”

“Yes; oh, yes! I love him with all my woman's heart. He is to me the sun, the moon, the stars. He is all, and more than all; and yet——”

“You fear him sometimes; do you not? It is but natural and womanly. You could not love him as you do, did you not reverence and fear his majesty. He is the king; and even when as his wife you rest upon his bosom, do not forget this; nor your fear of him. I have known Ahasuerus long, and I know that he must be feared, even by those who are nearest him. He is not like a common man. He is—the king.”

“But I may tell him of myself, of my kinship to you, Mordecai? Do not refuse me. He esteems you most highly, above all his counselors for wisdom; he himself said it. To you, also, he ascribes the happiness we both shall share. Do not say me nay, Mordecai! The king loves light and truth; he hates mystery and the dark. Condemn me not to difficult silence—I who would fain open my heart to him utterly, and pour out its inmost treasure at his feet.”

The scribe frowned thoughtfully. “I must think of this,” he said. “There is much at stake here, more than a woman can rightly measure; matters of statecraft, and of the weal or woe of a nation. No; I cannot answer you now. Nor do I release you from your solemn promise to me. All has gone well; the event hath prospered beyond my highest hopes. There can be nothing gained by publishing your birth and estate now; and much might be lost.”

“The king would not bruit the matter abroad if I— if I begged him not to. To-morrow he will proclaim me queen as *Esther*, without titles, names, or estates. He has said it. But oh, Mordecai, do not refuse to let me open my heart to my husband. Not to the great king, not to the noblest of the Persians; but to my husband. My heart demands this; and I fear evil consequences if this dark shadow

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of unexplained mystery must always lie between us. Nay, you shall not refuse me!"

Mordecai gazed into the exquisite pleading face uplifted to his with a smile.

"Already you assume the words and manners of a queen, my Hadassah," he said tenderly, using her Hebrew name. "And right glad would I be to bow my will to your imperial wish and command. But believe me, Princess, when I declare to you that I have only your highest welfare at heart. You are but a child to be placed at the dizzy height of a throne, and there are those who will hate you and plot to tear you from your place. You know not the ways of a court, as I do. And so I say to you wait till I give you the word. It may be soon; it may be many months, even years; but I shall not forget you, nor your wishes. Both are inexpressibly dear to me, and will ever be. But now I must leave you, child; and it may be that I shall not soon see you again. Do not presume too far on the king's favor. Love him in all truth; obey him; fear him. And pray without ceasing to our God that of His grace He will grant you that wisdom more precious than rubies, that you may walk safely amid all the hidden snares and pitfalls of this evil world. I also will pray for you. Fare thee well; and may Elohim bless you and keep you; may He lift upon you the light of His countenance and grant you peace!"

On the day following, Xerxes, King of Media and Persia, set his imperial crown upon the head of Esther, and proclaimed her his wife and queen throughout all the length and breadth of his vast dominions.





XVII



DURING all the days of feasting and revelry which attended the coronation of Esther, one apartment of the royal house, that recently assigned to Amestris, alone remained dark and gloomy. Within, prone upon a couch lay the discarded queen, with disordered garments and disheveled hair. She had wept till she could weep no more, and her pallid face, half turned from her unwilling attendants, gleamed like a mask of ivory against the dark cushions beneath her head.

Amestris had thus far been unable to force herself to a belief in her complete separation from the king. She had seen him but once since his return from Greece, and on that occasion she had herself dealt the last fatal blow to his languishing affections. Her altered looks; her tears; her whining reproaches had all proved intolerable to him. He had contented himself with repeating his former commands concerning her comfort and the imperial state to be allowed her in his house, for he was not unmindful of the children

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she had borne him. But inasmuch as the woman herself had been removed from him by the will of the All-wise, Ahura-Mazda, the king was willing to bow to the inexorable decree. She was, so far as Xerxes was concerned, henceforth to be numbered with the company of the dead.

But Amestris, womanlike, had not ceased to hope that it might be otherwise. She would again win her husband's regard, she promised herself; she would bind him to her with gratitude for past tenderness; and even if another queen must be chosen for reasons of statecraft and precedence, she might herself still remain his wife, in all that the state of wifehood really implied. She had even schooled herself to declare that she was glad to be no longer queen. The enforced state and ceremonial incident to that lofty position had irked her sorely. To retire into the quiet and partial obscurity of the little palace allotted to her by the king's generosity was, she said, quite to her liking. Of these and similar matters she babbled all day long to her women. And this while the king was whispering words of love in the ear of the fairest woman in all the kingdom, and the neighboring palace was being made magnificent for the new queen.

It was Atossa, the queen mother, who scornfully undeceived her.

"My son never loved you, Amestris," she said cruelly. "He simply tolerated you, because I willed it."

"Nay, he loved me once," sobbed the unhappy queen. "See how tender he was of my welfare even after he was tricked into discarding me."

"Xerxes was ever generous, though he oftentimes plays the fool," said his royal mother, in a harsh monotone. "He plays the fool to-day, when he crowns an unknown woman Queen of Persia."

"An unknown woman, say you?"

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“A Princess of Babylon, they call her; and no one, not even the king himself, knows what the title signifies.”

“I cannot believe it.”

“It makes no difference whether you believe it or not; the fact remains. And the king is in love with the creature. He himself told me so. *In love!*”

Amestris stared at the sneering face of the old queen, with wide, tear-reddened eyes.

“Is she very beautiful?” she asked plaintively. “I know that I have destroyed all my beauty by weeping; but who can wonder at it?”

“Waste no regrets on your lost beauty, my Amestris. Long ago you ceased to interest my son for that reason. Too many sweetmeats, as I often warned you, rather than too many tears are responsible for your faded skin and dull eyes.”

Amestris writhed under the cruel words; but she could not at once reply with the scathing sentences she vainly sought. Atossa appeared to possess the terrible faculty of first paralyzing, then stinging her victims, like the poisonous dumb adders that lurked in the flowery plains of Shushan.

“But the new queen is beautiful,” Atossa went on. “No one could deny that. The slave I sent to look at her lied to me, and I would I could torture her for it; but, unluckily, the creature is already dead. Beautiful; you may well believe it, since the king has thus demeaned himself. But there are many ways of putting away a queen, and more than one reason for so doing.”

“Will he divorce her; think you?” Amestris asked eagerly.

Atossa eyed the flaccid, tear-stained face of the late queen with a malevolent smile.

“He will put her away presently, yes.”

“But if he loves her, as you say——”

“Loves her? Loves an unknown— Nay; I cannot yet

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supply the word which describes her nationality. But I shall soon."

"Arsinoe, one of my slaves, told me that the princess appeared like a Jewess," sighed Amestris; "and her tire-woman was named Abihail. Is not that a Hebrew name? But it matters nothing to me. She is fair, and the king loves her; this it is that burns me like a torturing fire. I would that I were dead!"

The old queen had thrust forward her head, which appeared to flatten slightly as she bent her piercing eyes upon the other. "A Jewess! Ah! Suppose she be a Hebrew captive?"

"She can be no captive who is crowned Queen of Persia. Alas! Alas! I would that Vayu would take away my breath!"

"Fool! you weary me with your windy sighing, even as you wearied Xerxes. May Vayu fly away with you when he will. But first listen, if you are able. Where is this Abihail? I must lay hands on the slave. I can compel her to tell me what I would know."

"Why not ask Hegé?" inquired Amestris languidly. "But to what end? Nothing matters now."

"Is it nothing to you that the Babylonish woman—be she Hebrew or Chaldean—is now the king's lawful wife? She may bear sons. Xerxes will name them to the succession, if she continues to hold the ascendancy over him she seems to have gained; then your sons—nay, mine, will be set aside, cheated of their inheritance! Is this nothing to you?"

Amestris had begun to weep once more, and her sighs and sobs filled the darkened chamber.

"It is all true!" she wailed; "but I can think of nothing to do to save my poor children. Alas! Alas!"

Atossa stood looking down at the large, recumbent figure with malevolent eyes.

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"I should enjoy above all things to see you strangled!" she hissed. "You are of the spirit and temper of a slave, fit only to be beaten and spit upon!"

With these furious words the old queen swept away, leaving Amestris dissolved in useless tears and moaning among her pillows. After a little her slaves brought her food and wine on golden trays decked with flowers.

"The king sends you this banquet from his own table; rise, and eat, O Queen, and be comforted, for there are beautiful jewels and rich robes to be put on, and Meres, worshipful Prince of Egypt, waits in the anteroom without, desirous of speaking with the Queen's Majesty."

These were, in part, lying words; but Arsinoe, the discreet servant of Amestris, knew better than any other how to approach the fretful woman, who, in the midst of all her grief, could yet be cheered with delicate viands and rich wines.

Amestris allowed herself to be propped up by many soft cushions, and her tears ceased as she surveyed the exquisitely wrought service which Arsinoe declared came from the king's table, but which in truth had been arranged by the Greek woman's own clever hands.

"Then the king has not, after all, forgotten me," she said, as she tasted one of the dishes. "Not to Atossa herself does he send a portion of his own banquet."

Arsinoe smiled brilliantly upon her mistress, while she removed the cover from a particularly delicious preparation of fowls and vegetables prepared under her own eye.

"Forgotten you?" she asked. "How could one forget the sun in the heavens? It is not true that the queen is any less beautiful than of yore; it is only that she has of late somewhat neglected her toilet. Is it not so? But with the aid of proper cosmetics, unguents, and perfumes, such as a queen should constantly use, and wearing the robes and jewels belonging to her state the queen will again re-

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sume her rightful place as the most beautiful of all beautiful women in the one hundred and twenty and seven provinces."

"Do you really think then that I have not faded?" asked the queen wistfully. "Would the king, think you, still find me fair, as of yore?"

Arsinoe shrugged her shoulders in a sort of despair.

"The worshipful prince, Meres, is without," she again reminded her mistress. "Shall I bid him await the pleasure of the Queen's Majesty?"

"Meres! What can Meres have to say to me? I never liked the man; he is dark, ugly, sly, like all the Egyptians. I will not see him. Tell him to go away. I am seeing no one in these days of my sorrow."

Tears of sincere self-pity dropped again from her over-charged eyes into the jelly she was eating.

"But if my queen and mistress will deign to listen to the humblest of her slaves, she will not send the Egyptian prince away. He can wait—yes, while the queen partakes of her banquet in peace, and while she gives herself into the hands of her tire-woman to be made beautiful; but then she will receive the worshipful Meres. There may be a reason, a very good reason for his coming."

"Pour me more of that wine—the sweet wine, girl. I cannot abide that sour stuff."

"Yet it reduces the flesh. Ah, you cannot guess how it will beautify! The Queen Atossa drinks no other."

"She may drink what she will; she is ugly as Ahriman without her paint. I do not like sour wine."

"And the worshipful Prince Meres; I shall tell him you will receive him presently. Shall I not?"

"I care not. Nothing matters any more to me. Meres can have nothing to say which will serve to lighten my sorrow. But I will receive him in an hour's time."

Amestris appeared almost her royal self again when she emerged from the hands of her women and swept into the

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presence chamber where Arsinoe had arranged the soft white and rose-colored hangings so as to partly shut out the brilliant light of the summer sky.

Meres, Prince of Egypt, bowed low before her as he would have done before the reigning queen and his voice was soft with hypocritical sympathy, as he said:

"I deem it doubly an honor, Great Queen, that you receive me on this of all days. Had I found you prostrated with grief and anger at the terrible wrong that has been done you, I should not have wondered. But among all your enemies you have many friends, devoted to your interests and those of your children."

"My children are quite well and—and happy, save for my many sorrows," said Amestris uncertainly. "You—have not come to tell me of any disaster to my sons? May the gods spare me this final blow!"

The unfortunate queen clasped her hands as she searched the Egyptian's dark face, her eyes threatening to overflow with ready tears.

"Your sons are in excellent health, Madam and Queen, so likewise is your daughter," Meres hastened to assure her. "I saw them but an hour since seated at the banquet with the Great King, their father, and the new queen."

Amestris turned from him and half rose from her place.

"How dare you speak to me of that woman?" she quavered. "I—I hate her! I will not henceforth permit anyone to speak of her in my presence."

"You would be neither woman nor queen could you do otherwise," replied Meres blandly. "I speak, gracious Sovereign, only with a beneficent purpose, as a skilled physician wounds that he may make whole. There are many in Persia and in the provinces who will not only agree with the words you have uttered, but will take measures to make good their words."

He paused and studied the averted face of the woman

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for a space. "Your Majesty is not angry with her devoted servant, I trust? I am but the mouthpiece to convey to you the words of many lips and the—ah—fealty of many swords."

"I do not know what you would say to me, who speak of fealty and swords. The time is past for serving Amestris. I am naught but an outworn and discarded toy, little better than the creatures yonder in the House of Lions."

"Your Majesty greatly errs. You are the mother of the king to be; and as such your position is most exalted. Had you then forgotten that you have sons?"

"I have not forgotten my children—the gods forbid! And I love them with all the devotion of which a broken and blighted heart is capable. But what may this avail, since Xerxes may spurn my children as he has spurned me? It is in his power, and his alone, to name his successor."

Meres had fixed his piercing black eyes upon the weak, self-indulgent face of the woman.

"Ah, then you have also thought of the danger that threatens the state! You are more than woman and queen; you are also statesman and patriot."

Amestris sighed, and arranged her veil in more becoming folds.

"I think of many things here in my solitude," she said. "I have little else to occupy my hours."

"And have you also thought of a way to prevent this foul outrage which you have foreseen?"

"If I could kill her, the Babylonish woman, I would do it with my own hands! She has stolen my husband and my throne."

"You might easily accomplish the destruction of the usurper," Meres said smoothly. "But to what end? You would not by so doing make surer the succession to either of your sons."

"I would not?"

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“There would be other favorites, other queens; and Xerxes is still young, though the gods have grievously afflicted him.”

“Afflicted him? Is he then ill? Why did you not tell me at once?”

The lips of the Egyptian curled, and he again stared piercingly at the queen.

“Nay, it cannot be that the daughter of the brave Otanes yet cherishes any kindness for the man who has trampled her under foot, as he would trample the dust of the street.”

“You are cruel! Go away at once. I cannot listen to you.”

“I am kind; not cruel, and I would place you again upon your throne in more than your former state—Nay, you shall listen to me!”

“Speak not again of my husband—of the king as—as—despising me. I cannot endure it!”

“You must endure what is, Madam and Queen. But you may also alter what seems to be, if you will.”

“How may I do this?”

“By allowing those of your subjects who remain loyal to you and your sons, to serve you.”

“But how may this be done? I do not understand.”

“If your son Darius were king you would be again—and most truly—queen, who are now queen only by the forbearance of those who despise you.”

“But Xerxes commanded that all should hail me queen; I am queen, I tell you.”

The Egyptian sneered openly. “Go forth, most powerful of queens, into the courts of the palace, and count those who turn their eyes from the Babylonish woman to make obeisance to you. But I perceive that you did not listen to what I said. You did not hear me, perchance?”

“I did hear you, Meres, who wert ever the most dis-

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courteous of courtiers; but I found neither wit nor wisdom in your words. For how may my son Darius be king, while his father yet lives?"

"Ah! it begins to appear that I am speaking with one whom the Asuras have gifted with both wisdom and wit. It is altogether true that your son cannot sit upon the throne of his fathers until Xerxes be gathered to the land of the silent. Yet that another than Xerxes will soon occupy that throne has already been decided.

"But you said the king was not ill?"

"I was mistaken, Great Queen; Xerxes is ill of that most mortal of all kingly complaints, the hatred of his subjects."

"What—mean you?"

"Think you that a king—even the Great King Xerxes—may waste his kingdom with futile wars; that he may water the soil of a hostile country with the unavailing blood of thousands of his subjects; that he may outrage law, custom, and precedent; that he may insult and trample upon the hereditary rights and privileges of his most powerful nobles; that he may, as the climax of his crimes, raise to his throne an unknown woman of a foreign race, in defiance of the sworn oath of his father Darius to the seven princes, and live?"

"Do you mean— No! No! I cannot listen! Leave me! Leave me!"

"I will leave you, madam, if such be your pleasure; nevertheless, your opposition can avail nothing in the king's behalf. But you—you are not a queen, as I supposed. I counted upon your outraged majesty; upon your crowned and regnant motherhood for support at this crisis of a kingdom. They misinformed me, who said that you were possessed of the daring and warlike spirit of the great Otanes, your father. You are entirely content, I perceive, with your lot."

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“I am not content. I writhe daily under untold humiliations. But are you sure of what you say?”

“What I have said will assuredly come to pass; it is spoken and it cannot be unsaid. But we need your help, your resources. Your name, O Queen, linked with that of your thrice royal son must win over the greater part of the army. There could be no possible doubt as to the succession. The youthful Darius would be king; and you would occupy in the palace the position which has been occupied by Atossa.”

“But she—Atossa will discover the plot. She would prevent it! She would kill me! You do not know that woman as I do!”

“Do not fear the mother of Xerxes. She is already old and feeble. How could she avail against Amestris, young, powerful, beautiful; never more beautiful than now, let the most discourteous of her courtiers assure her. You could do with her as you will—cause her to be strangled, or——”

“Nay; I did not altogether mean that. But I must have time to think. I cannot picture it to myself—Xerxes—dead? How——?”

“He will be slain in the presence of the Babylonish woman, whom he has dared to set above my daughter,” hissed the Egyptian, his dark face alive with evil intent. “I, Meres, have sworn it! The eunuch Teresh will strike the blow, as the king sleeps in his bed.”

“Great Ashtoreth forbid! And yet—you say it will be done in her presence? She will see it! She will be plucked from the throne as a ripe apple is plucked from the bough! Oh, what a revenge—what a revenge! And I did not think of it, but only of him. But you say that he is ill, mortally ill; that the people hate him. And my son will be king—*mine!* God, what revenge!”

The Egyptian calmly watched the terrible conflict of

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passions in the woman's weak face. He was already confident of victory.

"Then we may count upon your countenance and support, Great Queen?"

"Yes, yes! I—I cannot bear to think of her in his arms; to think of him as happy with another! Let him die; and I shall be avenged of my wrongs!"





XVIII



MORDECAI, keeper of the king's seal, whose office at court obliged him to daily await the imperial orders in the King's Gate, as the great anteroom of the Hall of Columns was called, sat in his accustomed place, occupied with the manifold duties which his position imposed. There were many documents to be read and translated into other tongues, and upon all such as bore the king's sign manual he imprinted the image of the Lion Hunter of Persia.

As he impressed the signet in the soft wax that sealed a great parchment roll, his mind again reverted to the circumstance which had puzzled him at the time; namely, the unchallenged ingress and egress of Nathan to the presence of the queen elect. He lifted his eyes from his task to see the subject of his meditations standing before him.

The Prince of Edom was panoplied in the full uniform of a commanding officer of the Immortals; but he had bared

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his head before the royal official, and, winged helmet in hand, impatiently waited his attention.

"You are welcome, son of Asa," Mordecai greeted him gravely. "But why are you here, whose duties keep you ever near the person of the monarch?"

"I am here in the pursuance of those duties, Matacas. The king desires your presence and attendance upon him two hours after midday, in the garden of the fountains. He would make safe provision for—for the queen, his wife, in case sudden death or disaster overtake him. To no other will he submit these matters save to you."

The young man bowed his head, while a deep flush overspread his face.

"I would also speak with you, Mordecai, on my own behalf," he went on. "I think I was mad that day in the king's garden. I could not bear the thought of what I supposed to be true. I did not believe that the king meant to marry her; and so I was mad, and in my madness I know not what wild words I may have uttered. She has passed from my life now, and like the star I named her, is set high above my poor head in resplendent beauty. I may never again hope to speak with her face to face; but this I would say, if I might: *Forgive me!* Speak this word for me, Mordecai, as you have opportunity."

"I do not look to have audience with the Queen's Majesty," Mordecai said, coldly. "And should so great an honor be vouchsafed me, it would be indiscreet to allude to the past. You understand me, I trust."

"That she is forever lost to me, I understand; but I may yet adore her, my Star, whose effulgence cannot be hidden; and if the time ever comes when I can serve her with my sword or with my life, both are hers."

"So ever speaks the loyal subject," said Mordecai, yet more coldly; "but I trust the queen will not soon have need of your willing service."

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He looked keenly into the face of the soldier, observing his handsome features and glowing eyes with critical attention.

"I have somewhat more to say to you, Prince of Edom," he said slowly. "Not many days since, you gained access to the presence of Majesty in a manner unknown to me. I questioned the guards stationed at the door, and they told me they had been ordered by the king himself to admit the man bearing the king's signet. How then came you there?"

"I bore the king's signet, and was admitted, even according to the king's word."

"You are lying."

The royal guardsman laid his hand upon his sword, while his face slowly blanched to the color of clay.

"You forget to whom you speak, Benjamite," he said, the hot blood of the warrior David blazing up in his dark eyes. "Observe this seal, if you will. See, it bears the image of the king and his superscription. It was given to me by one of the Achæmenidæ."

"I did forget, strangely, Prince. I remembered only that you had reason to distrust me and my motives."

"I have indeed reason to distrust them and you. Thrice have you played me false; and how may I repose any further confidence in you? I believe you to be a man of insatiable ambition. To that ambition you would have sacrificed her, her life, her love; as for the last descendant of your king, he is no better than a baseborn slave in your eyes. If I have not altogether hated and despised you, Mordecai, it is because a softer feeling has prevailed. For her sake I will not slay you; for her sake I will even try not to hate you."

"You have altogether mistaken me, Nathan. Listen, and mark well what I say. Our captive race is hopelessly scattered throughout all the provinces; and while we are many, yet is our power weak. We have no leaders, no

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statesmen, no prophets. The hand of Jehovah lies heavy upon us. True, the King of Persia finds us convenient to him in many capacities, and so uses us as a man will use a tool fitted to his hand. But many of our merchants in the maritime towns have grown rich, and in the cities others have gained for themselves houses and lands, so that the eyes of the conqueror begin to rest upon us enviously. There has been a disastrous war; the people are impoverished; what shall hinder them from plucking this hardly gained wealth from the hand of defenseless captives? Moreover, there are those high in favor with the king who hate as well as envy us. An edict against the Hebrews, if perchance the king's ear be gained by those who would profit thereby, would be easily said. I know whereof I speak who have lived more than a score of years in the Persian court."

"Granted that all this be true, though I perceive nothing of it in the army, where such piracy has its rise if anywhere, what may Hadassah do to prevent it?"

"She may—Jehovah helping her—do everything. She is near the king, nearer now than any other. She has become the guardian angel of fallen Israel. Pray for her, Prince; pray also for thy captive brethren, and forget the small personal disappointment that has been meted out to you. Go now. It were not well that we were even seen talking together. Go; but do not forget what I have said."

Close upon the heels of the royal guardsman came a eunuch wearing the rich liveries of the deposed queen. His royal mistress, said this functionary, demanded at once the attendance of Maticas, keeper of the seals. And when Maticas demurred thereat, making plea of his official business, the eunuch showed a scroll writ by the hand of a slave skilled in writing and sealed with the queen's signet.

"'Tis a matter of life and death," read the scroll, "therefore obey without question."

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Matacas was well used to attendance upon the various members of the royal household; therefore he gave certain matters into the hand of one of his underlings and followed the eunuch to the little Palace of Rhododendrons, as the dwelling of Amestris, situated to the left of the House of Lions, was called.

The former wife of Xerxes was not weeping, for once; nor had she eaten or slept since the visit of Meres the day before. She was not even reclining upon one of the great divans heaped with cushions, but walking up and down in disordered fashion, her hands clenched, her eyes fixed and glassy.

“What of the king?” she whispered, approaching her white face close to that of Matacas, and fixing him with her haggard eyes. “Does he yet live? I asked my slaves; but no one could tell me certainly of Xerxes.”

The Hebrew, thinking the unfortunate queen had lost, by reason of her misfortunes, what little wit she once possessed, spoke soothingly to her. The king, he assured her, was in excellent health.

“You have seen him?”

“Not this morning; but I am under command to appear before him to-day. He is in health else I should not be summoned.”

Amestris heaved a great breath, as if relieved of some intolerable burden.

“I—I fancied him—dead,” she murmured. “Dead in his bed—*murdered!* All night I have seen him lying cold and ghastly beneath the golden vine of Samos with its jeweled clusters. But he still lives—lives! The Ahuras guarded him, and shall guard him. But I, even I, will avert the sword from his breast!”

Matacas felt a great pity for the unfortunate queen, whom he conceived as removed from her place to make room for his own kinswoman by a power more absolute than that

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of Auramazda, God of the Persians. He spoke to her with a voice of gentle authority, bidding her cease her weeping and compose herself.

“I will call the women in attendance and one of the physicians of the king to fetch such medicines and restoratives as may be useful to the queen,” he said, meaning to make his escape from so unprofitable an occupation as listening to the ravings of one demented, when Amestris caught him by the sleeve.

“Stop!” she ordered. “You have much to do. There is a plot on foot to assassinate the king. The eunuch Teresh is sworn to kill him at night in his bed. I consented, because they will make my son king in the place of his father, and because I hate the woman who has stolen my place. But I cannot after all—I cannot let them do it! I love him too much, even yet; and to think of him as dead! Let them kill *her*, if they will; but—I—cannot——”

Her voice trailed off into silence, though her dry lips still formed words of terrible import.

Matacas, convinced now that a frightful crime had been contemplated, questioned the queen skillfully; and in the end elicited from her unwilling lips the main features of her interview with Meres. When he had learned the name of the man chiefly implicated, he at once understood what had happened, and trembled to think of the web of intrigue and hatred which was already weaving about the beautiful Esther, his kinswoman.

“The Egyptian will kill me, if he finds that I have betrayed him,” whispered the wretched queen; “but what could I do? I saw nothing but Xerxes—dead, and the sight maddened me! I care not if my son be king. Let the king name whom he will to the succession. And Xerxes will count me guilty if he hears that I listened to the Egyptian. He will cause me to be put to death, even if I survive the anger of Meres. And I—I am afraid. To be

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strangled, to be crucified as I have seen malefactors! How could I bear it?"

Matacas was deep in thought, his head bent, his hand playing with the strands of his silver beard. The half-insane utterances of the unhappy queen buzzed about his ears like a swarm of gnats. He raised his hand at length, commanding silence.

"Listen!" he said. "It must not be known that you have told me this. I will frustrate these bold designs, as if I alone had uncovered them. I will save the king."

"Dear, good Matacas!" sobbed the woman. "I sent for you because I knew that of all men you were most to be trusted in Shushan. Then I may remain in peace, knowing that you will not betray me?"

"It rests with you whether or no it shall be published that the mother of the king's sons was guilty of plotting against the king's life," Matacas said, with exceeding sternness. "There will be many other conspiracies called into being by those envious persons who hate the king, or"—his voice became menacing—"the newly crowned Queen of Persia. You will be approached by such malcontents because you have been divorced from the king, and because you possess great wealth and a certain prestige remaining to you from your former glory. This I will assure you, and this you must engrave upon the tablets of undying memory: Perform, sanction, or encourage any injury to the young Queen of Persia and I shall at once lay bare your infamy. Death by strangulation or crucifixion were too kind a punishment for a regicide who has been wife of the king and is still mother of his children."

"You—you terrify me!"

"I would terrify you, woman, into such silence and peaceful intent as shall hereafter forever prevent all possible dangers of the sort. Another time you might not repent and reveal your guilty conspiracies. Swear to me by Aura-

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mazda, whom you believe to be the holy and all-wise God, that you will henceforth protect the king's life by every means in your power."

"I swear it, gladly, by Auramazda and all lesser deities!"

"Swear to me by Auramazda, the only true God, one with Elohim, who is maker of heaven and earth and all that in them is, that you will not injure, nor cause to be injured, the Queen of Persia, who is called Esther. Quick, woman, or I call the guards to bind you!"

"I—swear it!"

Matacas, keeper of the royal seals, went out from the presence of the erstwhile queen, confident that he had cut off wholly and for all time one possible avenue of danger to his beloved kinswoman, who was now elevated to such a towering pinnacle of greatness that he was conscious of watching with scant breath, lest she fall and be dashed in pieces at its foot. As for the plot against the king's life, under the keen eyes of Matacas it was presently seen to dissolve into thin air, harmless as a cloud of morning mist. It had emanated wholly from the brain of the wily Egyptian, Meres, and had no deeper source than his anger over the supposed affront to his daughter, who had for a time been lodged in the king's house under the title of Princess of Thebes.

Matacas related to the king such details of the plot as seemed wise, without implicating either Amestris or the Egyptian satrap. The eunuch Teresh together with a fellow servant were crucified that same day; for they were caught with weapons in the very bed-chamber of the king, concealed behind the gold-embroidered arras of his bed. And while the bodies of the malefactors still writhed on their crosses, a proposal of marriage for his daughter, in behalf of the king's oldest son, Darius, was laid before Meres, Prince of Thebes.

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And thus the whole occurrence was written by the king's scribes in the book of the Chronicles of the King. And there it remained. No reward was meted out to Matacas, keeper of the seals, because he had saved the king's life; but he was well content, because Jehovah had prospered the matter in his hand, and because the queen, who was called Esther, lived in peace in the king's house.





XIX



OUTH of the great mound of ruins which marks the site of the once magnificent palace of Xerxes in the ancient city of Shushan, lies a smaller elevation, revealing to the explorer the crumbled remains of the same sun-dried bricks which are found at the foundation of the greater mound. This heap of ancient ruins once formed the superstructure of a palatial building, second only to that of the royal abode in its magnificence. Here, raised high above the city and the plain in regal fashion, shone the marble walls and porticoes of a great house, surrounded by those wondrous elevated gardens, first built in Babylon in the days of Semiramis, and afterwards deemed indispensable appurtenances to other royal abodes in the various cities of residence.

In the garden of this great house, on an autumn morning, when the deciduous trees and shrubs were beginning to shed their leaves, the handsome and haughty mistress of the domain was berating her servants with a tongue wherein

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dwelt not the law of kindness. The garden walks had not been properly swept, she declared, and forthwith ordered the gardener to be scourged, albeit every passing breeze brought showers of yellowed leaves to the ground. The marble steps and porticoes failed to show the high finish deemed requisite to their beauty, and the keen black eyes which inspected the labors of the slaves who had been engaged in polishing them kindled into impatient fury.

“Laggards and gluttons all!” she cried, “you shall have no food till sunset; then, if all is not to my liking, you shall also go under the lash.”

The lady gathering her rich robes in one jeweled hand passed from the inspection of her terraces and gardens into the house, where she finally emptied the overflowing vials of her wrath upon the defenseless heads of certain maids and tire-women who were engaged in fashioning embroidered stuffs and tissues into a variety of garments for the lady's future requirements. She snatched a sleeved tunic of rich stuff from the hands of the woman who was sewing it, and trampled it contemptuously under her small feet. Because—it was gathered by the frightened woman—the worker had failed to incorporate into its elaborate borders that modicum of the royal purple permitted to wives of officials high in the favor of the reigning monarch. Other workwomen suffered at her imperious hands in varying degrees; and all were reduced to trembling silence, before the great lady, wearied with her repeated outbursts of anger, finally passed into her inner apartments, presumably there to recline upon a cushioned divan and recuperate her exhausted energies.

She had not, however, had time to sink into the tranquil slumbers which were wont to follow the morning rounds of her palace, when she was disturbed by the hasty and unannounced entrance of a man, splendidly dressed, but quite evidently in a bad temper.

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“Always sleeping, like a cat in the sun!” he cried, angrily staring at the relaxed figure on the divan. “At what hour shall I find you awake and ready to receive me, madame?”

The woman lifted her short upper lip in a stifled yawn, while she surveyed the man from under haughtily lowered eyelids.

“My lord is somewhat—shall I call it abrupt?—with his devoted wife,” she observed, in a low, carefully modulated voice. “What, then, has occurred to vex my lord?”

“Everything, and nothing that you can remedy, Zarara,” the man answered, throwing himself into a carved chair, over which hung a superb leopard skin. “I am required at once to pluck the moon from the sky for a woman; and I am in sorry plight, who have no ladder long enough to reach it.”

The dark eyes of Zarara sparkled.

“What woman demands this of you?” she asked; “perchance your wife may find the ladder, or silence the request.”

The man’s coarse features relaxed into a doubtful smile. He leaned forward and fingered the woman’s white shoulder, as one would caress a favorite animal.

“You are not lacking in a certain shrewdness, my Zarara,” he said loftily, “but—well, I will tell you my case. It is, after all, a matter requiring a woman’s sly wit rather than a statesman’s acute powers.”

He broadened his shoulders and frowned majestically, while the woman smothered a laugh of scorn in her mantle.

“You have seen our newly crowned queen,” he went on with a gesture of impatience. “Of what nationality is she, think you?”

“She is a Hebrew,” Zarara answered unhesitatingly.

“Surely not,” disagreed her husband. “She bears a Persian name, Esther.”

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“So also do you, Haman, son of Hammedatha; but you are, nevertheless, of the royal blood of the Amalekite kings. The queen is a Hebrew; I am sure of it. Shall I tell you why?”

“Ay; tell me.”

“’Tis not only the fashion of her countenance—and that clearly bespeaks her origin to the attentive eye; but she prays to the God of the Hebrews and to no other.”

“Who said it?”

Zarara smiled arrogantly. “’Twas learned by exercise of a woman’s sly wit, as you are pleased to call my distinguished prudence and discretion in conducting the affairs of your household. Perhaps, if it were not for my despised wisdom, the son of Hammedatha would not now be chief of all the counselors of Xerxes. I am always sleeping, it is true, like a cat in the sun. So also sleeps Bast, the cat-headed goddess, worshiped and revered by the Egyptians; but always with a listening ear. So sleep I.”

“And what heard you in your dreams, bright goddess of my heart and fortunes?” entreated her husband, aware that only through flattery could he obtain the coveted information his consort was withholding from him with a teasing glimmer of bright eyes under half-closed lids. Zarara was not unlike the sleek, sinuous, treacherous animal to which she had compared herself, and Haman respected her almost superhuman acumen, while he affected to vastly despise her feminine methods of gathering information.

“Yesterday I slept soundly at the hour of noon, most valiant and honored of lords,” replied Zarara, with a mocking inclination of her small dark head, “and so, being asleep—but with the open ear of Bast—I heard my slaves and tire-women talking amongst themselves. These base creatures of our underworld have ears; eyes also have they, and feet shod with silence. Often they perceive things that we from our superior eminence have overlooked.”

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“Do not weary me, woman, with vain babblings. I am in haste,” quoth the man, plucking at his elaborately curled and scented beard. “Tell me at once what you heard.”

“Go, then, in what haste you will. You disturb me. I would again sleep.” And the woman flung herself back among her cushions with an affected air of great weariness.

“I will depart, woman; but I may not return, since I have had the dire misfortune to offend Atossa, worshipful mother of the king.”

Zarara’s dark eyes flew wide.

“She is an old Harpie, that woman; a true cat of Bumbastes, if you will. How came Atossa to set her claws in you, foolish one?”

“She sent for me on the day of the crowning of our queen—may she live forever; since such, it would appear, is the gracious pleasure of the king—and, having closeted herself with me, the daughter of Cyrus propounded divers hard questions to be left unanswered at my peril.”

He bent forward and whispered certain words in the woman’s attentive ear.

“How could she have discovered your secret after you had put to death the one man who was aware of it?” Zarara demanded sharply. “You must have babbled it while drinking overmuch wine at a banquet, and Atossa’s spies are everywhere! Many times I have warned you!”

“You warned me!” sneered the man. “You entertain me with the brilliant movements of your intellect, Zarara. I cannot tell you how the most puissant of queens came upon the unfortunate episode at Ecbatana; but it matters little, save that she has promised me upon her royal honor to make all known to the king, in case I fail to furnish answers to her several questions. This I cannot do; and to-morrow, she assures me, not later, she will explain all my doings in the city of which I have spoken; and further make deposition of other matters which I considered deep buried in the past,

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but which have now risen from their tomb to haunt me with their dire faces."

"What does the old queen require you to find out?" asked Zarara, drawing her delicate brows together.

"She requires of me full information relating to Esther, the king's wife. Of what nationality is she? From whence did she come? Who was her father? who her mother? To no one in the court are these things known, and Atossa desires to be acquainted with them."

"To what end?"

"That she may destroy the woman, I suppose. It is known that she wishes to place Artisonna on the throne. More than that, as you well know, the revered mother of Xerxes is never so happy as when engaged in terrifying or destroying some one. And where so tempting a quarry as this strange queen, who came out of the darkness, borne by tongueless slaves, and who has conquered Xerxes himself by her surpassing beauty?"

The attentive Zarara pursed her scarlet lips disdainfully.

"I cannot see it," she said angrily.

"What? the answers to the questions put forth by Atossa? Assuredly not. Did I not tell you that I am already a ruined man?"

The woman burst into a light, rippling laugh of scorn. "You amuse me," she said, "with the simplicity of your ideas. If you were in reality a ruined man should I, think you, recline here supine among my cushions? My fate is linked to yours, whether I will or no; and so you shall not at present be ruined by a lack of information with which to regale the withered ears of the old queen. A rich feast I promise her."

"Lies will not answer in this case, woman, however skillfully you may compose them."

"A lie could be fashioned which would satisfy even Atossa, the mother of lies, son of Hammedatha; nevertheless,

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the naked truth unadorned by the least falsehood will amply suffice on this occasion."

"Tell me what you know—quick. I must return to the palace at once."

"Go in peace, my lord. I shall have all needful information prepared when you return to me at sunset. At present I intend to withhold it."

Haman got to his feet slowly. "That accursed Hebrew who sits in the king's gate daily affronts me, in spite of the threats of my servants. It was you who counseled that course. How may I feel any confidence in your promises this time?"

Zarara had also arisen, and now she flung her delicate arms about her husband's huge neck, and looked up into his face, her own all aglow with delighted mischief.

"What would you say, great lord of mine, if I should whisper to you that here in this house of ours, I have the talisman which shall abase the proud head of Matabas to the very dust before you?"

"Do this, Zarara, and I am truly your slave!"

"Nay; but you are already my slave. A score of times you have sworn it. Once, when my woman's wit saved you at Ecbatana; again, when you would have lost all that you possessed in a single venture on that unlucky merchant of Shiraz; and a third time——"

The man closed the scarlet lips with a quick pressure of his own.

"Spare me, Zarara," he entreated, "the recital of my various follies. I acknowledge my vast indebtedness to you; but I also have done somewhat on my own account. Am I not the richest man in all the kingdom? Do I not count my darics by myriads, and my slaves, horses, chariots, and estates by hundreds? And am not I the chief of all the counselors of Xerxes?"

"You are all, and more than all that you have said,

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great Haman," cried the woman, "and because you are great in mind, body, and estate I, who would hate and scorn a meaner man, love and adore you utterly. And so you need not fear to trust me; only do not speak of ruin, defeat, or loss. The words cause a shudder of fear to pass through all my inmost being; for this much I have discovered: there can be no lasting prosperity where fear dwells."

"Tell me straightway of your talisman which shall humble the Hebrew, Matacas; for truly the man poisons all pleasure in my greatness. He corrupts my servants, also, by his persistent refusal to do me lawful homage. I cannot longer endure it."

"Nor shall you be forced to do so, dear lord. Only be patient till I can tell you all that I would. At sunset you shall not find me sleeping; but instead a banquet of the most exquisite foods spread for the two of us alone. I will send and put off those stupid persons who look to eat at our expense to-day. To-night, to-night, sweet lord, I will tell you all!"

When a second time the Lady Zarara passed through the chamber wherein sat the company of women who wrought embroideries, and who sewed skillfully with the needle, she smiled sweetly and praised all that had been done. Also she bade one of the women come to her in her chamber that she might try the effect of a certain tunic with a sleeved coat of a new Babylonian fashion.

The woman in question was dark and old, and much overburdened with flesh; she spoke the Persian tongue, moreover, with a strange, foreign accent, which caused the younger maids to laugh and jeer over their needlework. But she possessed great skill in certain fine embroideries, and none knew better than she how to arrange the folds of a sleeve or the fit of a robe about the neck and chest.

The Lady Zarara was most gracious to the foreign woman that day; her voice was sweet and low, and not once

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did she speak harshly, though the sleeved coat of Babylonian stuff did not at all harmonize with the tunic and robe designed to accompany it.

“Many things do not harmonize in this sad world, alas!” philosophized Zarara plaintively; “and many bitter changes befall persons as well as garments. Now, I perceive from your superior knowledge of various things that not always have you served in a menial position. You have once been rich; is it not so?”

The woman heaved a deep sigh, which caused her large figure to quiver like a mold of jelly. “I was not rich,” she replied, “but it is true that I occupied a far different position in life. I once lived in the house of one where I alone was mistress, and where I had full liberty to do as I would.”

“But a change came. Alas! so it is with all of us. You are not a native of this country, I perceive, by the exact and careful manner in which you speak the Persian tongue. You are—may I guess—a Hebrew?”

The woman cast down her eyes, but the astute Zarara perceived that her fingers trembled.

“We also, my husband and I, were of a captive race,” murmured the lady sweetly. “But we have prospered, notwithstanding. And so likewise has your Jehovah greatly prospered your afflicted race. That the queen is a Hebrew cannot fail to be of great moment to you.”

“The queen—a Hebrew? Who—said it?” stammered the woman, her tongue thick with amazement.

“Why, indeed, everyone knows it,” smiled the Lady Zarara. “How else could she be so distinguished in her beauty, so elegant in her person? No other women compare with the women of the Hebrews in their first youth. Now the queen, I should venture to say, is scarce twenty years old.”

“You are right, madame; she is but eighteen.”

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“ Ah! you knew her, then, before she became the queen of Xerxes?”

“ I did not say so, I—but——”

“ Ah! do not be afraid to speak freely to me; and why deny what may be of signal advantage to you? You once served the young queen, perchance? Nay, if it were so, I might easily arrange to have you restored to her service. I am told that she is displeased with her chief tire-woman, and why should not you hold the position, who are skilled above most in all matters of the toilet.

“ Why, indeed?” echoed the woman, her large dark face reddening with sudden anger. “ She loved me best of all her women, and with reason, since I——”

“ You had been long with her, perchance, and so earned her confidence?”

“ I brought her up, even as a nurse and mother; and you may well say I served and loved her from the beginning. But there, I babble; as I have been forbidden. It is true that love and anger unbind even the tongue of the wise; and even yet I cannot abide the memory of my dismissal without a burning resentment.”

“ Unfortunate woman!” sighed Zarara, “ I sympathize with you deeply. I know well what it is to be separated from those we love. How beats the heart, slow and heavily; and there is a strange burning pain—ah! how often have I experienced it! but tell me more—tell me all! I can help you, my good woman; my position at court is not without its advantage, and my heart is ever warm, though my tongue is often sharp.”

“ I fear you could do nothing for me, kind lady, though my mistress, I know, has often wept for me. No one could soothe and please her as I could. No other was permitted to attend her in her bath. She could not have known that I was not to accompany her to the king’s house; and often I have wondered how she fared without me. Twice have

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I made bold efforts to see her; but each time the guards have refused me admittance. If the gracious lady of Haman could indeed bring it to pass that I might once kiss the hem of her garment, I should be ready to serve her always."

"I can easily arrange it, my poor woman," Zarara assured her compassionately; "but tell me, what do they call you?—so that I may speak to the queen."

"My name is Abihail," said the woman, after a visible struggle with herself. "She will know, and I care not who else knows it," she added boldly. "Jehovah be my witness that Mordecai did me a foul wrong!"

"Mordecai?—ah, yes, you mean, of course, the Hebrew, who——"

"They call him by another name in the palace," grumbled the old woman. "But it was he who caused me to be taken from my child. He feared lest I should betray the queen's nationality. But you tell me that everyone in the palace knows she is a Hebrew. There can, therefore, be no further reason for Mordecai's excessive caution. He was ever fond of hiding all that concerned him under a cloak of secrecy. But when it comes to hiding a great queen, his mantle is too narrow, say I!" And she cackled merrily, as if well pleased with her wit.

"You are quite in the right, my excellent Abihail; but while I and others high in position know right well of the queen's relationship to this Mordecai, you should not on that account——"

"I said not that she was of kin to him," interrupted the woman rudely, her mirth suddenly subsiding into sullen reserve.

"But I am right, nevertheless? Of course everyone had guessed it from his excessive devotion to the queen's interests. It is what we at court call an open secret."

He told me that no one knew of it in the palace; that he would suffer quite as much as I should it be spoken of."

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“He told you that? Ah, my poor Abihail, even the best of men are oftentimes most selfish, and—shall I say it?—deceitful. They care not how we suffer, we whose hearts are tender and loving, whose very lives are bound up with those we love. But Mordecai should not have told you that no one at court knew of his kinship to the queen. Just what that kinship is I have often amused myself by guessing. She is his daughter, I have said to myself. No? His niece, then, since he is so much her senior. What? they are children of brothers, say you?”

The old woman nodded her head wisely.

“I will tell you,” she said, “since you already know so much. The mother of Hadassah was a princess of the line of Judah, whose king, Jeconiah, was carried captive to Babylon in the old days; and her father’s brother was Jair, the father of Mordecai. Now you have the whole matter.”

“Ah, I see it clearly now! How full of interest, and how sweet the devotion of kinship! Then you are not, as I fancied, mother of the queen, excellent Abihail?”

“I, mother of Hadassah? Nay, I was only her nurse. But I loved her even as a mother, and as a mother, also, I have bewailed her loss these many months.”

“Poor, poor Abihail!” murmured Zarara, with exceeding sweetness. “I shall not forget what you have confided to me. But it shall be between me and thee alone, shall it not? For, believe me, it is not wise nor prudent to speak too freely of those high in position. Indeed, you must promise me that you will not tell any other what you have just told me?”

Abihail trembled. “I—I fear I ought not to have spoken of these matters,” she faltered. Mordecai will be very angry with me, if he discovers that I—that you——”

“Mordecai shall never know of it, dear, good, tender-hearted Abihail, and I shall at once endeavor to obtain an audience for you with the queen. I shall succeed, I am

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sure. But tell me one thing more before we part; the excellent Hebrew, Mordecai, who is of kin to the queen, where is he employed in the palace? I would know this that I may not blunder with my tongue when I speak with our beautiful and beloved queen concerning these matters which will be of such close interest to her."

The woman pursed up her withered lips.

"Mordecai is a wise man in his own eyes," she said garrulously. "And he imagines himself high in favor with Jehovah as well as with the King of Persia. He goes every day to the hall which is called the King's Gate, where he sits for many hours merely pressing the signet of Xerxes into soft wax. I could do as much."

A jubilant light leaped up in Zarara's eyes.

"Can it be believed that a near kinsman of the queen is content to be a scribe and a sealer of parchments?" she exclaimed softly. "Nay, the gods must have a more exalted position in store for him. As for you, my good Abihail, the king will doubtless delight to give you anything you require if, as you say, the queen loves you. And let me, as the queen's friend, advance an insignificant portion of that which rightfully belongs to you." And she pressed a purse of gold into the old woman's hand:

"Remember," she said, at parting, "this is our secret, good Abihail: tell no other what you have confided to me!"

When the old Hebrew woman departed at sunset from the palace of Haman by a mean door leading to the street, she was not aware of a dark figure which followed her quite to the house of Mordecai, near the south gate of the city.

To this house she had returned at the stern bidding of the scribe; but from it after many weeks a great discontent had driven her forth to find such employment as should bring her nearer to the person of her beloved mistress.

In the house of Haman she had found all that she sought, and much more. she was thinking, as she let herself in from

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the street and shut and fast locked the heavy door behind her. The man, who had followed her thus far, stood for a moment staring at the house. Then he wrapped his face in his mantle and stole quietly away down the shadowy street.





XX



HE powerful and magnificent Haman, highest of all the subjects of the crown and most highly esteemed of the counselors of Xerxes, was dining quite alone with his wife Zarara. Other wives had Haman; but these, being inferior both in beauty and intellect, were lodged in a meaner dwelling quite out of sight and hearing of the haughty daughter of Dalphon. And of his ten sons and four daughters not one was present. Zarara had sent them summarily away that she might converse in strict privacy with her husband.

Between the two was spread a table of ivory and gold from which noiseless slaves had just removed all save a great silver platter of superb fruit and a small flagon filled with the amber wine of the royal vintage.

It was a custom, approved by many generations of royal princes, for all noble Persians to drink wine till the senses reeled, whenever an affair requiring serious thought demanded discussion. Intoxication was supposed to elevate

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the reason and clear the judgment, and the half insane utterances of one far gone in his cups were thought to merit an almost oracular interpretation. But the observant wife of Haman thought otherwise, and on this occasion only the lighter vintages had been served to her lord, and in niggardly quantities.

The man drained his small goblet of Sidonian crystal at a draught and set it down with a harsh laugh.

"What call you these toys?" he asked, fingering his cup contemptuously. "They are fit only for women and children. Cause my great cup to be fetched."

"Alas! my lord's great cup has gone to the goldsmith's to be repaired," Zarara answered smoothly. "But let us now speak further of the matter whereof I have informed you. Do not, I entreat of my lord, join with Queen Atossa in any attempt upon the woman who is called Esther. It will be useless, and only disaster can come of it."

Her voice was low and pleading, and she fixed her eyes anxiously upon the handsome, cruel face of the man.

"I swear that of all women you most resemble Astarte, whom the Egyptians also call Bast," he answered. "Yet even the superior gods are said to nod upon occasions, and so, we may suppose, do the goddesses. Your sagacity, my Zarara, is for once at fault. I shall tell Atossa all, and together we will destroy the whole brood of crawling vermin. So will the greater include the lesser revenge, and I shall yet witness the crucifixion of the impudent scribe, who not only refuses to prostrate himself before me, but has also dared to make a scurvy jest of the Queen Mother, the court, and the king himself, by means of this common Jewish woman, this slave girl, who calls herself Esther, whom he has contrived to elevate to the throne.

"But I have told you that the queen is not of the baser Hebrew stock," persisted Zarara. "The woman Abihail declares that she is of the royal line."

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“A royal Hebrew? Nay; what is a royal Hebrew? One may find many such laboring in the king’s quarries, or scouring the pots in the king’s kitchen. They are all alike, captives and slaves.”

“So also are the descendants of Agag, if to be a captive is to be a slave.”

“Name not Haman, the Agagite, in the same breath with the dog-faced Hebrew!” burst out the man in a black rage of anger. “I long to see him suffer; to laugh at his agonies; to spit upon his dead body!”

Zarara shivered involuntarily. Then she smiled.

“It pleases my lord to be somewhat coarse in the expression of his hatreds, as in certain of his loves,” she said. “Yet I must warn you of one thing which you persist in ignoring: the king is mad with love for this Jewish woman. He will defend her as a lion defends his mate. Hate Matacas as you will; do with him as you please, even to hanging him upon a gallows fifty cubits high, where all the world may see and laugh with you, but touch not the queen.”

Haman appeared lost in a black reverie.

“A gallows fifty cubits high!” he muttered. “Who ever heard of or imagined such a gibbet? Nay, whether you be angel or devil, Zarara, the thoughts which visit you are not like the thoughts of other women.”

“Assuredly not. But listen, my lord, I have other words to say.”

“Always you have other words to say, woman; but I cannot always find time to listen.”

“This time you must listen; and you will do well, also, to ponder upon what I shall say. No sooner has the moon reached its full brightness than, for no reason that man can give, it begins to waste away; and no power either of man, god, or devil can prevent its speedy return to the darkness from whence it emerged; this much have I observed.”

“It pleases my lady to speak in the words of a diviner.

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Since when has my Zarara added sorcery and magic to the list of her many accomplishments?"

"'Tis a dark saying; but it means much."

"Come, you anger me!"

"I will even expound my meaning to you, most sapient of lords. The King's Majesty in this parable of mine signifies the sun."

"And I?"

"You, my lord—reflecting the glory of Mithra, the powerful—are the moon. The sun neither waxes nor wanes; but the children of men have ever observed the contrary of the orb of night."

"Then you think me waning in my powers? Does all this look like it, woman?" and he included with a wide sweep of his arm the visible wealth of his surroundings. "This very day I gained another vast accession to my estates, merely by asking for it. Xerxes will do anything I suggest. I am able to mold his will with mine, as the potter molds the clay with his fingers."

"Not always will you find the royal clay so pliable," mused Zarara thoughtfully. "Nay, my lord, it may well be that your star has reached its zenith; and while all goes well with you, yet——"

"The woman paused, and set her white teeth on the soft red of her under lip.

"All is well with me to-day," cried Haman boastfully; "to-morrow, also, all will be well. I declare to you, woman, that there is nothing which can prevail against me and my great power and glory!"

"Yet this very morning you called yourself a ruined man in my hearing because Atossa had learned a secret of yours."

"I was but jesting, my Zarara; I am powerful, invincible, I tell you!"

"And I tell you that your greatness will crumble like

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a snow wreath, if you but touch the queen. Let Atossa attempt it if she will, but do you—*beware!*”

Haman burst into a great laugh of scorn.

“The queen has bewitched you with those shining eyes of hers,” he said. “She is wondrous beautiful, I grant you; and Xerxes cares for nothing save her beauty in these days. He is foolishly uxorious as a newly wed shepherd, and thinks only of how he may please his wife. But the madness will presently pass. I will wait till this happens, if it please you.”

Zarara shook her head. “I care nothing for the woman’s eyes,” she said scornfully. “To me she appears not over fair. She is too thin, too tall, and her color is indifferent. Nay, I cannot say why I am afraid to have you become the queen’s enemy, yet I know that ruin lies that way.”

Haman arose abruptly from his place.

“We linger overlong in unprofitable discussion, my Zarara. I must go at once to Atossa, and tell her what I have learned.”

The woman sprang after him with a stifled cry.

“Do not go yet!” she entreated, clinging to him with both slender hands. “Stay! let me, I pray you, go to Atossa. I will deal wisely with her, as a woman may. I will say to her that you are weary—ill; that the king has sent for you—anything! Only do not go to her to-night. It frightens me to think what may happen!”

“Let me go, fool! You weary me with your arrogant assumption of wisdom. This has become a matter of statecraft, and will affect nations. Meddle no more with it; but leave all to my superior judgment.”

The woman stood quite still looking after him, her eyes tortured with strange forebodings.



XXI



HE king was weary, and as had often happened in past years, an unreasoning yet bitter sadness weighed upon his spirits. Lost in this dim maze of disquieting emotions he thought vaguely of his queen, and called one of his chamberlains to bid her come to him in their old trysting place in the garden. Then he frowned irritably as he perceived a page attached to the royal bedchamber in the act of presenting before him a small jeweled box.

“What is this—some new unguent?” the king demanded angrily; “take it away and give it to Babires.”

“May it please the king, the box contains a writing for the eye of the king alone.”

Xerxes differed from his royal predecessors in many particulars, and in nothing more than in the scholarly attainments unusual to potentates of any country. He owed his almost unique accomplishment of being able to read and write to his astute mother, who was accustomed to declare

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that ignorance of what the scribes were writing made the scribes masters and princes their tools.

The king opened the box and found therein a tiny scroll containing a single sentence, written in the elegant characters of a skilled scribe. He read it, and his face grew darker than before.

“From whom did this writing come?” he asked.

But not one of his many attendants appeared able to answer the king's question. The frightened page, it appeared, had brought the writing at the bidding of a certain eunuch; and the eunuch, when questioned, could only say that the box was given to him by another of the grooms of the bedchamber; this man when sought for could not be found. And presently the king passed into his garden, the writing still crushed in his hand.

Hither also came Esther, the queen, after a little delay, all in a lovely flutter of haste.

She had grown more beautiful since her marriage; and the light of a supreme happiness shone in her dark eyes, and gleamed rosily about her whole stately presence, so that she appeared more a gravely beautiful goddess than a woman. And so Xerxes saw her coming to him through the ranks of late fall flowers. He did not rise to greet his queen, as was his custom, and his face looked dark and stern as the strange human heads of the great winged lions that flanked the royal house.

When Esther had approached quite near to her husband and perceived that he neither smiled nor spoke, all the proud gladness faded from her eyes; and for the first time fear of him, which the king's own hand had leashed, struggled with love. Then love conquered. She came swiftly forward and knelt at his side.

“I have come at your bidding,” she said simply, and lifted her clear sweet eyes to his with all the confidence he had himself taught her.

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The gloom on the face of the king lightened and he breathed a deep sigh.

"You are fair to-day, my queen," he said, "fairer than ever. Look at me!"

He bent forward and gazed piercingly into the dark eyes, till she trembled and paled.

"It has not pleased my wife to tell me many things concerning her past, which I would fain know, that all may be open and clear between us. But this one thing I must ask; and you shall answer. A man came to you in the garden here, on the day in which I permitted you to receive the scribe, Matacas. Who was it?"

Her face quivered, as she bethought her of the terrible punishments meted out to unbidden intruders in the king's private domains, but she answered at once and with perfect truth.

"Let not the king be angry with me, nor with the Prince of Edom. He had known me in my childhood, before ever I came to the king's house, and he feared lest I——"

"He was your lover? Answer quickly!"

"He loved me; yes."

"*And you loved him?*"

The king's look was terrible; his young wife shrank under it like a delicate flower beneath the fiery eye of the sun; but she answered steadily:

"I loved only the king."

Xerxes arose, pushing her from him so rudely that she stumbled in her long draperies and would have fallen to the earth, but he caught and held her for an instant in a savage clasp.

"Woman, I had given my very soul into your keeping to do with as you would; if you have deceived me, lied to me— But no; I will not listen to your protestations. No woman could face my anger and speak truth. Go!"

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All her outraged wifehood leaped into her eyes.

"I will go," she said; "but I speak the truth when I declare that I am innocent of all evil intent. I have loved you, and you alone!"

Then her heart cried out in an exceeding loud and bitter wail. "Let me tell you all!" she entreated. "Nay, I can no longer keep anything from my lord. I care not who forbids me!"

Xerxes repulsed her with a look full of coldness and suspicion.

"It is too late," he said, "to babble of confidences now. You should have told me all when it was possible for me to listen. Now I shall find out for myself what you have chosen to withhold. Go!"

She obeyed him, her proud head hanging, her beautiful, pallid face convulsed with grief and fear."

It was on that day the king gave command concerning the words of an ancient law, long since relegated with other savage barbarities to the annals of the past, that it should again be in force. And from thenceforward executioners armed with swords stood on either side of the king's seat ready to put to death any person who approached unbidden, and to whom the monarch extended not the scepter of clemency.

And this it was supposed was done to cut off the approach of malcontents, who might have nursed divers conspiracies against the life of the king. And no man save Xerxes was aware that in the small jeweled box there had already reached the king's heart the deadliest of all poisons.

On that same day, which chanced to be the thirteenth day of the first month which is called Nisan, in another room of the palace sat Haman, the Agagite; and before him certain astrologers of Egypt, clad in black robes embroidered with cabalistic zodiacal signs and wearing high pointed caps, were engaged in the pursuit of their sacred profession.

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The Egyptians, with many strange gestures and much consulting of charts whereon the heavenly bodies were set with what truth was known to the most ancient of civilizations, were casting The Pur before the great privy counselor. The Pur consisted of large cubes of ivory, bearing strange devices carved on their several sides, the which were stained deeply with human blood drawn from the heart of an unblemished youth. To profit by the use of these strange symbols one must first utter certain prescribed words in a strange tongue; then, after shaking the narrow-mouthed vase seven times, cast forth the cubes upon a table; the devices lying uppermost determined the answer sought.

"A fortunate day for a great undertaking," was the demand of Haman. And many times did the astrologers cast The Pur upon the table before him, a broad gold piece being the price of every throw.

From day to day and from month to month did they progress slowly; yet still the stars refused to be kind, and the pile of gold darics grew apace, while Haman waxed impatient to the point of uttering strange oaths.

"Too long you are putting off the day—the day of my revenge!" he muttered, when all the months in their order had failed to reveal the propitious day, and they had now come to the last month, Adar, and to the thirteenth day of the month.

"Let my lord behold The Pur!" replied the chief astrologer piously. "For at last the stars unite with the sacred symbols of blood. On the thirteenth day of the month Adar much blood shall surely be shed in many provinces of the great king; and this is the day, moreover, chosen of the deities who preside over life and death. Of this may my lord be certain."

"Cast again, and tell me on what day I shall go to the

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king and obtain the request which I shall prefer," demanded the Agagite, licking his lips.

And they cast, and The Pur signified that the day was already come.

Haman flung down twenty pieces of gold before the astrologers and went out to ask audience with Xerxes.





XXII



O Xerxes, self-walled about with death and loneliness, there came no soft relentings, no tender recollections of hours of happiness such as he had never even dreamed in former days. He cursed himself for his credulous folly, for his ready compliance with the counsel of Matacas, for his too easy belief in the queen's honor and truth. She was, he told himself bitterly, like all the rest, a beautiful lie, an exquisite parasite and cheat. In this black-hearted mood he received Haman.

The chief counselor quailed inwardly as he looked into his royal master's clouded face. It seemed a most unpropitious day in the which to beg a favor of the King's Majesty; yet The Pur had so declared it, and Queen Atossa had urged him to the course, declaring that the time was ripe for decided action. Unlimited money, power without end, revenge glutted to the full, the royal favor unstinted, his daughter the king's wife—these were the glittering

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guerçons held out by the astute queen. On the other hand, should he refuse to obey she pointed to certain dishonor, banishment, poverty, and perchance death in some loathsome form.

Xerxes stared at the large, florid face of his chief adviser and a forked lightning flash burst from the black cloud of anger that encircled him.

"Why grimace and mouth in my presence like a sick ape?" he demanded. "You have, I perceive, something you wish to say. Say it and be done. I am in no mood to be approached as a hunter stalks his prey, circling wide, yet drawing ever nearer in cautious approaches. Diplomacy may suffice with such vain fellows as Meres. But I cannot be flattered, cajoled nor persuaded into anything contrary to my will. From henceforth my subjects must know it, or suffer the consequences of my displeasure."

Haman's dry tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; but he contrived to utter the opening sentence of the address he had carefully prepared.

"I am here to present to the king's Excellent Majesty a matter nearly concerning the welfare of his kingdom, the enlargements of his revenues and——"

"What is it? Speak in few words, or leave me."

"The great king cannot be ignorant of the fact that there is dire complaint from many provinces concerning the severity of the taxes; and this together with failures in divers crops and untoward business conditions in the great cities, has brought about a general state of poverty and restlessness among the people everywhere."

"A bad case truly," sneered Xerxes. "What is your remedy, wise Haman?"

The privy counselor drew a deep breath and slyly moistened his lips.

"'Tis chiefly of the remedy I would speak, Great King. The people ignorantly suppose that they are impoverished

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by the late wars, in which the king has conquered gloriously."

Xerxes made an impatient gesture of denial, and Haman proceeded rapidly, his small eyes, of a greenish color, rolling uneasily from side to side.

"But the people are mistaken. They are not impoverished by war tax, scarcity of harvests, nor yet by the conditions of trade. All these are normal and right, fluctuating but little from year to year. The real cause of the growing discontent lies in quite another quarter; and it waxes big, day by day, and in strength and rapacity, also, even as the vampire bat which sucks its strength from the carcass to which it fastens. The kingdom of Persia is the ox which eats abundant grass in the meadows, yet grows ever weaker, because the life blood is being secretly drawn from its veins by such a vampire."

"If you can speak otherwise than in riddles, which I hate, do so. What is this vampire, which sucks the strength and substance from my kingdom?"

Again Haman's eyelids fluttered in a sudden panic of fear. Despite his great bulk, he was essentially a coward, and ready even now to back away, like an unbroken horse, from the terrible task which confronted him. Then the remembrance of the gravely scornful face of Matacas, the Hebrew scribe, came to him, and hatred contributed a false courage which fear was unable to supply.

"The vampire, my Lord King, is a people, a captive race, widely scattered throughout the length and breadth of the king's dominions. This people fear not Ahura-Mazda, the All-wise; nor do they worship in the temples according to the Zoroastrian ceremonial prescribed by the king's excellent laws. They keep themselves separate in all things; eating their own food, worshiping their own gods, marrying always among themselves, and breeding many children. Moreover, they possess for wealth the curious attraction of the magnet

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for the iron; so that in whatever cities or provinces they dwell gold and silver flow into their coffers without stint; to be hoarded there for—what? This no man can say; but those wise in matters of statecraft, and knowing something of the history of this people in the past, will tell you that they plan cunningly to gain control over all things Persian, even *the throne*.”

“Of what people do you speak? There are many races commingled in Persia.”

“This people, of whom I speak only truth to the great king, mingles not with other races. They are a separate people; and will ever be. I speak, divine Xerxes, of the Hebrew race.”

The king smote his knee with a great oath. Then for a long minute he appeared lost in gloomy thought.

“Granted,” he said at last, in a changed voice, “that what you have said is true. What must be done to check the greed, the insolent rapacity of this race of dogs?”

“A Hebrew has chanced to offend the king,” was the thought which leaped unspoken to Haman’s mind.

“The remedy must be drastic and thorough,” he made instant answer, his voice gathering volume and authority as befitted the great statesman and privy counselor. “As nothing less than the death of the bloodthirsty vampire can relieve the suffering ox, so nothing less than a complete extirpation of the people of which I have spoken may restore the kingdom of Persia to its pristine power and splendor. Let this race of foul vampires be slain, man, woman and child; let not one of them remain to perpetuate his kind. Then, and not till then, will the tide of national wealth which has been diverted from the king’s subjects be restored to its lawful channels. Complaints will cease; prosperity will be restored in full measure, and the name of the king of kings will be glorified in every nation because of his foresight and wisdom; and, moreover, all foreigners and

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captives within the length and breadth of the king's dominions will henceforth fear to attack the glorious body of Persia in any vulnerable part."

"There are many Jews in the army," mused the king; "and many more in my own employ in the palace."

"Let not personal considerations influence the Great King in this matter, urged Haman, grown ever bolder, as he perceived the astonishing effect his words appeared to have exerted over the king's mind. He had not looked for so easy a victory. Nevertheless, he thought best to add his final argument.

"If my words seem good to the king, let it be now written that this people be utterly destroyed, in every province and city of the king's dominions; and I will myself see to the carrying out of the decree. I will also pay into the king's treasuries ten thousand talents of silver, that there may be no further drain on the royal purse."

Haman's voice trembled slightly as he named the enormous bribe which had previously been determined upon in a secret conclave between himself and Atossa.

"My son needs money sorely," said the old queen. "I chance to know this; and he will, therefore, not refuse your request."

The king received the final words of his minister in silence. He was thinking of many things, but chiefly of his queen and of her connection with this hated race. It was the Hebrew, Matabas, who had first drawn his attention to the beautiful Babylonian princess, in whose love he vainly fancied he might forget his unhappy and disappointing past. It was Nathan, a Hebrew prince, who had dared force his way through the king's guard to lay his guilty passion at her feet. The young queen had denied that she loved the Jew; but could she be trusted to speak truth? Was any woman to be trusted? This he must know by some means. But how?

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Haman, mistaking the king's continued silence to mean displeasure at the sum named, again spoke.

"I mentioned ten thousand talents of silver, my Lord King," he said, humbly; "and this, it seemed, might more than meet the expense of the measure proposed; but I will even make it half as much again, if ten thousand talents be not sufficient—fifteen thousand talents would——"

Xerxes arose abruptly from his seat, in token that the audience was at an end; and once more Haman's knees smote together in craven fear of anticipated failure and its terrible consequences. But the king's last word dissipated his needless terror and filled him with hardly concealed astonishment.

"The silver is yours; the people also, to do with as you will."

"Instantly Haman held up the index finger of his right hand in token that scribes be called.

"The edict, Great King, shall at once be written, and the measure carried out without unnecessary delay," he said, and added the formal words of confirmation of a decree; which, if unchallenged, established the spoken word of the king among the laws unalterable, which could not be broken.

That same day, Matacas, keeper of the king's seal, and chief of all the scribes in the palace of Shushan, was required to properly translate, transcribe, seal and dispatch into all the one hundred and twenty and seven provinces of the king's domain a document which provided for a complete and entire annihilation of the Hebrew people; "Be they men, women, infants, or children; in whatever town, city, or province; of whatever occupation, profession, or trade; all such shall be destroyed, killed and caused to perish upon one day: to wit, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. And the spoil of

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these shall the inhabitants of Persia and Media take for a prey.”

And thus suddenly did the storm burst, whose distant mutterings the wise scribe had long since heard below the horizon. Such of his assistants as were of his own nationality wept and cursed and tore their beards and their garments; but Matacas spoke sternly to them, forcing them to their duty, and reminding them that the order accompanying the decree was haste; and that even now the swift posts were being prepared in readiness to go forth that same night by order of the King's Majesty. He added, what they knew right well, that outcries and disobedience but meant a swifter destruction; and also that Jehovah still ruled over Israel, albeit his ear seemed heavy at times, and the arm that had saved the nation in past ages shortened that it could not save.

All night the scribes labored at their dreadful task with white faces and haggard eyes and lips that muttered alternate prayers and curses. At dawn all was finished and the posts went out. The words of doom, moreover, were blazoned in many languages upon the walls of the city and in the courts of the palace itself, that every inhabitant might read and understand.

And Mordecai, his labors being at length finished, went out into the midst of the city, clothed in sackcloth and with ashes upon his head and beard, and cried with a loud and bitter cry.





XXIII



HE Princess Amytis paused with one small, sandaled foot on the threshold of the royal gardens to wipe one or two rebellious tears from her eyes; then she stepped proudly past the guards in their imperial uniforms, and hastened toward the central pavilion, where she had been bidden to an interview with her father.

She had not of late been often with the king, who appeared indeed to have forgotten his children, together with the more arduous cares of state and many less important things, in the new and delightful life with his queen. Now he had been forced to recall the existence of a daughter by reason of an offer of marriage which, in the judgment of his counselors could neither be refused nor lightly set aside, inasmuch as it was preferred by the Median satrap, Mathistan, Prince of Ecbatana, a man of vast consequence in his own eyes and possessing, moreover, the power to foment or quell disquieting revolts as best suited his interests.

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Xerxes looked up from the parchments he was studying as his daughter entered the small room in which he was sitting.

“Ah, child, you are here as I bade you! Sit yonder whilst I finish these matters. The scribes are waiting.”

The girl pouted with anger at the delay, and fresh tears arose to her blue eyes, to be furtively wiped away as the slow minutes lengthened.

At last the king gave the parchments into the hand of the waiting scribe, and turned with a grave countenance to his daughter. He had not been unmindful of her agitation when she entered his presence, and he had purposely given her time in which to conquer her tears.

“Come and sit at my side, daughter,” he said kindly. “I wish to speak with you concerning this matter of your approaching marriage.”

The princess colored angrily over all her fair face. But she answered with forced composure:

“Is it settled, then, that I must marry this hateful Median, and be banished forever from the persons and the scenes I love?”

Xerxes frowned; then smiled.

“You put the matter unfairly, Amytis. Come, let us be reasonable and speak of the matter calmly. You are too truly a daughter of mine to allow prejudice and passion to rule your actions.”

It was the turn of Amytis to smile. She knew as well as the rest of the narrow court world that both passion and prejudice ruled Xerxes in many—far too many—of his words and actions. But she answered with girlish diplomacy.

“I am not great and wise like my father, the Great King; yet like him I also love certain ones and hate and despise others. This I cannot help, and would not if I could. Now this Median, I——”

“You have not yet seen the Prince of Ecbatana, little

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one; how then can you hate and despise him? Nay; you should rather love him of whom you have heard only good."

"I have heard nothing concerning the man, save that he is old and ugly, and dwells in Ecbatana, and that he wishes to make me his wife. Why should the Median wish to marry one whom he has never seen? But you need not answer; I know already. It is because I am the daughter of Xerxes; I might be cross-eyed, black, deformed, pock-marked; it would not matter to the man; he would still wish to wed me."

"But you are, on the contrary, beautiful, my child; and of the Prince of Ecbatana I will tell you one or two things. He is not old; he is, in fact, no older than I."

Amytis shrugged her slim shoulders with a resigned air of girlish tolerance.

"And furthermore, he is not at all ill-looking," the king went on; "on the contrary, Mathistan is called a personable man, of a bold and martial bearing. But these are minor considerations. The point is that you must wed, Princess; and this man pleases me. He will, therefore, please you."

"Why say you 'therefore,' my father? I do not esteem all the persons who please you. Now Hegé I detest and despise. And that great counselor of yours, Haman, is no better. He reminds me of nothing so much as of a great, cowardly boy, who eats too much for his good every day, and——"

"You forget yourself, Princess," her father said sternly. "Come; you will obey me in this matter of the marriage and all will be well."

To his amazement and something very like dismay, his haughty daughter threw herself at his feet with a burst of wild tears and incoherent words.

"Why, what— Nay you must control yourself, my child; I cannot understand this—this utter abandonment of

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your self-control. There. This is better. Now tell me what troubles you."

"I love another."

"*You?* You love another? Impossible! when no man save your brothers and myself are known to you. Has your mother dared to——"

"Do not blame my poor mother. She has never controlled my actions nor my thoughts. But there is no use of even speaking to you concerning the man—the only man I could love. He is already condemned to death."

Xerxes drew his black brows over his stern eyes in a way that his attendants feared.

"You must enlighten me further, Princess," he said coldly. "Who is this man, whom the daughter of the Great King has so favored?"

"He is a Hebrew, and you have condemned all of his race to death and dishonor. How could you be so cruel?"

The king was silent for a space.

"What is the man's name?" he said at last.

Amytis looked timidly at the frowning face from under her long lashes.

"I do not like to tell you when you appear so angry, father. I fear you might command your terrible swordsmen to kill him at once, and that would break my heart."

"A woman's heart is not easily broken," muttered the king, his thoughts once more centered upon Esther and her Hebrew lover. Were all his women mad over these condemned captives of an alien race, he wondered bitterly. Something of his thought colored his next words.

"The Hebrews are a deceitful and dangerous people," he said, sternly. "I will not longer suffer them in my dominions."

"But it is so sweet to love," murmured the girl. "And what heaven to be beloved! You know that, dear father; for Esther loves you more than all the world."

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At this bold and, to the king's mind, indelicate reference to his private relations with his queen, Xerxes' brow grew black as night. He opened his lips to make scathing reply; then something in the girl's clear eyes checked him. She was, after all, not unlike the woman who had won his heart in her perfect innocence of the world and her girlish directness. These were the qualities Xerxes most prized in a woman; yet a mischievous or malign fate appeared to have decreed that he must always be crushing them beneath the iron heel of his anger. He looked searchingly at his daughter.

"Do you see the queen often since she became my wife?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; very often," replied the girl, with obvious pleasure and relief. She even smiled as she reflected that by means of her friendship with Esther she might hope to escape the hated marriage with the Median prince.

"When did you last see her?"

The lurking anxiety in the king's voice did not escape the girl. She returned his keen look with one of frank reproach.

"I saw her yesterday, my father. I went to her palace to carry some new scrolls of Persian poetry, which she loves even as I do, and found her weeping."

"Weeping? Did my—did the queen tell you why she wept?"

He clenched his great hands beneath his robe. He thought he knew the answer right well.

"Not at first. But I persuaded her. She feared that you—that she had offended the king."

"And this—this fear caused her grief?"

The king's voice rang scornfully; a sneering smile curled the corners of his mouth.

"Why should she not grieve whose heart is bound up with the king's love? You made her love you, and she can-

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not help it now, though it is wiser for queens and royal princesses not to love too deeply—so my mother says.”

At this incautious allusion Xerxes’ dark face reddened furiously.

“You—you are overbold, girl! ’Twere best for the daughter of Amestris to keep her distance from Queen Esther.”

“I am the daughter of Xerxes,” the girl said proudly; “and why should I not choose the friends that please me? Esther found favor in my eyes even before she had the good fortune to attract the king’s notice. I was not even surprised when I was told that you would marry her. I should have wed her myself, had I been a man.”

The king could not conceal a smile at this arrogant speech.

“I repeat that you are bold to the verge of indiscretion, daughter of Xerxes; it will be well, I think, for you to reside at Ecbatana in the future.”

“Oh, father! At least permit me to wait a month or two before deciding. You will first let me see the man, and——”

“I have already commanded Mathistan’s presence at court. You will have opportunity to become acquainted with him before the marriage takes place. Go now. But stay; there is one thing I would ask you. Did the queen confide in you further—to the unfoldment of the matter wherein she feared she had offended me?”

The king’s halting words held strange inflections, as of fear or perplexity; and Amytis, pondering his reply, briefly decided that one of the many unsuspected foes of the young queen had been making secret mischief between the two. She answered therefore with all the boldness for which her royal father had reproved her.

“The king is, of course, aware that more than one person in the palace envies the queen; and because they envy

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and therefore hate her they will undoubtedly try to cut her off from the favor of the king."

"I did not know this, Amytis; and I am not pleased to learn that you are thus early being drawn into palace intrigue."

"I am entangled in no intrigue," said the girl, lifting her small head with a pride equal to his own, "nor will I be ever. I hate and despise the perpetual small hatreds and petty wranglings with which the women of the royal house regale themselves as with sweetmeats. But everyone is forced to excuse my grandmother, because she is the daughter of Cyrus and the king's mother. I excuse her chiefly because she is now old and knows no better."

"*Atossa!*" exclaimed the king sharply. "I had forgotten my mother."

"It is not wise to forget one's mother—for long," the princess said dryly. "And more especially if that mother chances to be a thrice royal lady who never forgets herself for even the fraction of an hour."

The king looked fixedly at his daughter.

"There is a certain Hebrew, at present absent with a detachment of the army, who once loved Esther."

"Yes, I know," said the girl, frankly. "It was the Prince of Edom."

"*She told you this?*"

"I compelled her to tell me as much; for I already suspected it."

"You suspected it! How, in the name of Ormazd?"

"I was jealous," timidly confessed the princess, with eyes down-dropt. "But I found my fears quite unnecessary. He loved her when she was but a child. Who could help it? But she——"

"She returned his love, of course."

The girl glanced at her father in open astonishment. He appeared to have had no ears for her own tacit

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confession. His eyes were imperiously demanding her answer.

“I have already told you that Esther loves the king, my father; and no woman can love two men equally and at the same time, though it would seem that a man has often accomplished as much.”

“She loves no one save the king. Aye; she swore it; but I did not believe her.”

“Would you prefer to believe my grandmother, then? She will be overjoyed to assure you that there is no such thing in all the world as love; but only hatred, and ambition, and lust of gold. I am glad I do not believe a word she says, though may Ahura-Mazda forgive me the crime of dishonoring an ancestress!”

The king did not appear to have heard this pious wish, and after a moment of frowning silence, he dismissed his daughter with a peremptory word which she could not but choose to obey.





XXIV



ESTHER, the queen, had received neither word nor sign from her royal consort for many days; and her attendants, both male and female, were eyeing her with sly glances of curiosity, not unmixed with alarm. Was the star of this new favorite but lately in its zenith so soon approaching a swift eclipse? Had she angered the king by some unthinking caprice? Or was he already weary of the charms in which he had delighted himself to the full? Artissonna, the beautiful Princess of Media, whom Atossa had taken under the sheltering wing of her royal favor, still remained in the house of the dowager queen, and it was rumored that she would shortly be presented to the king with due pomp and ceremony.

In the midst of all this disquieting buzz of hardly suppressed surmise and suspicion, Esther alone remained tranquil. If she felt any fear, any humiliation of spirit, any anguish of wounded affection, any torture of jealousy, she hid all beneath a dignified reserve of manner which effec-

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tually kept at a distance those who would have hastened to probe her wounds under a specious show of loyalty and affection.

Even the queen mother, ever ready to gloat over a victim of her wiles, failed to derive anticipated satisfaction from an interview which she made occasion to demand with the woman she chose to consider an impudent intruder in royal circles.

Atossa had presented herself in the palace of the new queen with more than her wonted grandeur of retinue. She had been at once admitted to one of the large, beautiful rooms, lately fitted up with a magnificence hitherto unknown even in the magnificent palace of the most magnificent of living monarchs; and here her wrath and bitterness of spirit threatened to quite overflow their bounds as she narrowly examined the rich furniture of ivory and gold, the tables of lapis lazuli and agate, the walls inlaid with precious stones and metals, the hangings of marvelous Babylonian stuffs and the rich carpets from Egypt and the more distant provinces of Ind.

The young queen entered with a graceful gliding step, just as the fiery eyes of the old woman had finished their tour of inspection; she bowed low before the mother of her husband, but did not kneel as Atossa evidently expected.

"How is this?" cried the imperial scold, "that you do no reverence to the mother of the great king? You who are not even royal in your antecedents."

"I do such reverence before the mother of Xerxes as is fitting for one who kneels not to the great king himself," answered Esther, in her soft, sweet voice. She betrayed no sign of fear or anger, but looked down from her superior height upon the shrunken form of Atossa with a grave smile.

"Xerxes does not permit me to do obeisance before him,"

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she added; "how then shall I bow my knee before any other human being?"

"Hah! you save your devotions for your god. Tell me, woman, whom do you worship, and after what manner?"

"I worship the one God, the All-wise, in whom alone dwells truth and purity," replied Esther in a low, resonant voice. She had used the Persian words devoted to Ahura-Mazda, when she uttered the phrase descriptive of the attributes of deity. And in this she conceived that she did no wrong; since, if there was but one God, he might be variously called of the various nations without sin.

The old queen, foiled in this attack, seated herself upon a great chair and motioned to the younger woman to stand before her.

"What think you of the edict of the king against the Hebrew race?" was her next shaft, selected with care from among the many poisoned arrows in her quiver.

"The king's edict against the Hebrews?" faltered Esther, and her face became suddenly pallid as the snows of distant Lauristan.

Atossa observed this with cruel satisfaction.

"What!" she exclaimed, in affected surprise, "then it was not you who influenced my son against the cowardly, foreign dogs? I was about to congratulate you upon your shrewdness in so doing. But you did not even know of it? I confess that you surprise me. How can this be the case with the king's latest favorite?"

The old queen's insulting emphasis upon the last word roused Esther from her condition of paralyzed terror, as the sharp touch of the goad rouses a spirited steed. She lifted her head and gazed at the older woman with a hauteur equal to her own.

"You mistake, Madame and Queen," she said, distinctly, "I am the king's wife."

"You are also a Hebrew, and condemned to death under

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the law!" hissed the old queen, throwing prudence to the winds in her fury. "Even now your scheming kinsman, Matacas, the king's despised tool and parasite, beats upon his breast in sackcloth without the palace gate; whilst you—" her look was terrible—"deck yourself with jewels like a low-born concubine. But you shall perish with the rest, woman, be assured of that!"

Then she swept away in a whirlwind of rage and strong perfumes and rustling silks and floating tissues, leaving the young queen half fainting in sick terror.

Esther recovered herself presently by a strong effort of the will, and in this hour of her dire need she again lifted her heart in agonized petition to the unseen Presence which she had learned to find in the silence, and in whose unfailing effluence she had discovered a singular joy and peace which the world could not reach. How long she remained alone with bowed head and petitioning lips she knew not; but she suddenly became aware of a strange presence in the room. The figure was that of a majestically beautiful woman, clothed in a voluminous garment of white, which shimmered curiously as if the body beneath emitted actual light. The eyes of the woman were set full upon the young queen, and there was a look in them of great tenderness, yet of tenderness blended with strength and strong encouragement. As Esther gazed at the still face she felt herself filled with an unreasoning comfort that asked not its source, but knew itself to be.

"Call now thy kinsman, Mordecai, and bid him cease his mourning and be of good courage."

The words seemed impressed upon Esther's consciousness rather than spoken. Then of a sudden the strange, shining woman was gone, and the queen remained alone. She called her attendants presently, and questioned them straitly; but they all agreed that no visitor had gone in or out from the queen's presence that day save Atossa, the mother of the

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king. They looked also to see a frightened horror or a ghastly fear writ large upon the face of their mistress. What they did see filled them with amazement. The queen's large eyes held a mysterious light of peace, and her mouth curved itself in new lines of strength and beauty.

"Go," she said to Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, "and find Matacas, the scribe. Fetch to him garments, also, and bid him lay off the sackcloth of mourning and be of good courage."

The eunuch returned anon and informed the queen that he had found Matacas, even before the king's gate, for no one might enter the palace wearing the emblems of grief or dishonor, and that the Hebrew scribe wept unceasingly and beat upon his breast because of the edict.

"Moreover," quoth Hatach, "the Jew refused to receive the garment at my hand; and he bade me tell the Queen's Majesty that all the Hebrew nation had been sold for both slaughter and pillage to Xerxes, the king, for the sum of ten thousand talents of silver; and that this had been done by no other than Haman, the Agagite."

Hatach delivered this message word for word, as he had been bidden. He also eyed the queen with large eyes of wonder, and waited, with his curled and perfumed head cocked impudently to one side, until she should cry out or faint. He was of those who had been corrupted by Atossa; yet he could not find it in his heart to altogether hate his gentle mistress, who now appeared so sorely beset and without friends in the palace.

"If the queen will but listen to me," he went on, lowering his voice to a whisper, "I counsel instant flight, with what jewels and valuables may be hastily gathered. I will myself accompany the queen, and bestow her in a place of safety; for I am a man of substance, and have estates in Erivan."

The manikin swelled out his pitiful person with all the

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airs of pride and arrogance his kind were wont to assume to themselves.

“Be advised by me, lovely queen,” he again urged, “as by one who knows the cruel ways of a royal court. With the king’s affections alienated and the old queen an avowed enemy, the palace is no place of safety for a young and beautiful woman of the queen’s nationality. Believe me, flight is the only——”

Esther checked him with an imperative gesture.

“Be silent!” she commanded. “I do not require your counsels. Go now again to Matacas, the king’s scribe, and tell him that the queen commands him to come to her. Turn not to the right hand nor the left, but instantly obey me.”

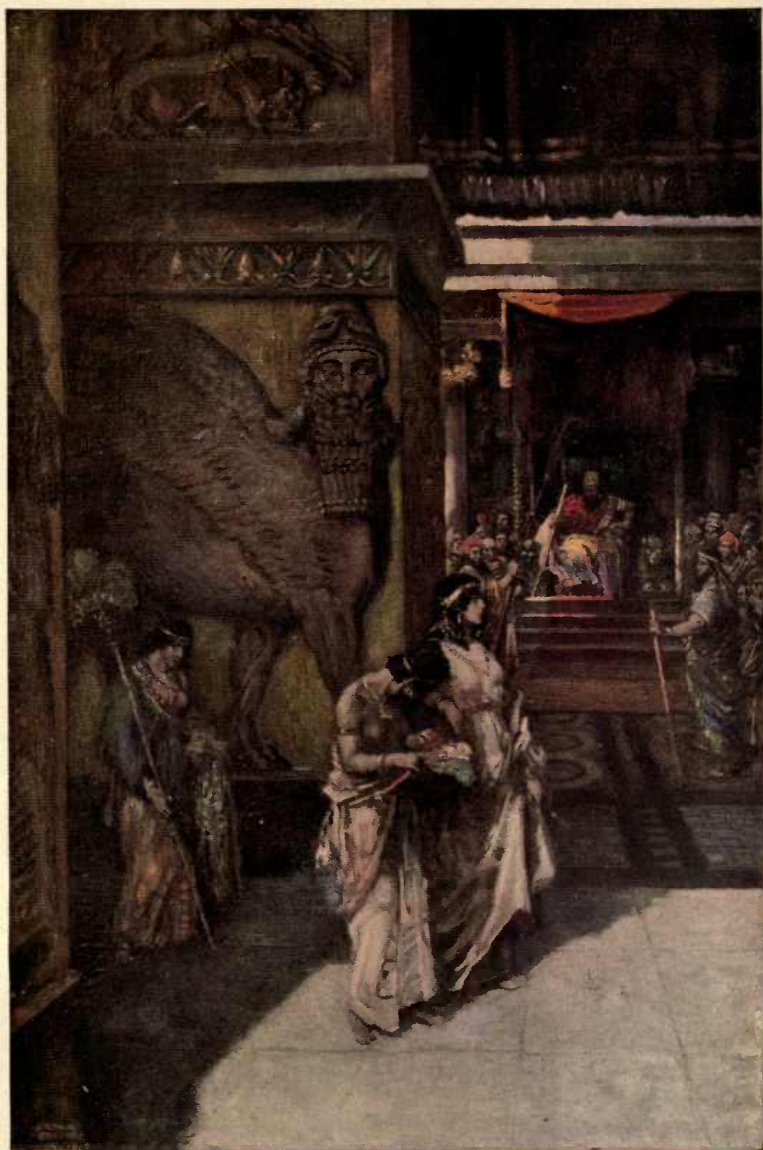
Matacas came to the queen after an hour or more. He had put off his sackcloth, but a garment of sad-colored stuff covered his gaunt figure from his head to his feet, and his great beard was torn and disordered.

The young queen, in her beautiful robes of white and violet and gold, and wearing the many jewels her tire-woman had put on her, came to meet him.

“Tell me,” she entreated, “what is this word I had from thee by the mouth of Hatach, whom I do not trust? And from Queen Atossa, also, who seems to have no other feeling save hatred for everyone?”

Forthwith Matacas repeated to her all the terrible words of the edict which the king had made, and which was now published in all the provinces both far and near.

“You will do well, woman, to put off the garments of praise in which you have clothed yourself as for a festival,” he said, and his voice held the harsh melancholy of generations of mourning prophets, “and put on the garb of woe and mourning. For think not that you will escape the doom of your people in this gilded palace. There will be those appointed to take your life, even here.”



“ SHE PAUSED, A VOICELESS PRAYER TO ELOHIM RISING FROM HER WHITE LIPS.”

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“But surely Jehovah reigneth in Israel, as he has ever reigned!” cried Esther. “He will save us!”

“Not always does Jehovah listen to the cries of his people—alas!” groaned Mordecai; “for, behold, we have all sinned grievously, and there is no prophet, no leader, no one to save, unless—” He ceased speaking, and looked half sternly, half tenderly, into the beautiful face uplifted to his. “There is no savior for Israel,” he repeated, “unless thou, my child, art the chosen instrument for our relief.”

“I, Mordecai? Nay, what can I do?”

“Thou must even go to the king, and tell him of thy nationality, and entreat him to give to thee thy life and the lives of thy people. There is no other way.”

“But, Mordecai; the king is angry with me—he does not trust me, because I would not break my promise made to you so long ago. Ah! if I might have told him while yet he loved me. But now I fear him.”

“Nevertheless, my child, you must obey me. It was not that you might wear jewels, sleep soft, and be nourished upon the fat of many lands that Jehovah led me to bring you to the palace, *but for such a time as this!* And mark you well, woman, if you refuse to do this thing which has been appointed to you, deliverance will arise for the Jews from some other source. Jehovah will not suffer His chosen ones to utterly perish, but thou and thine shall be swept away, and black oblivion shall swallow both thee and me.”

Esther trembled exceedingly as these solemn words sounded in her young ears. She laid fast hold upon Mordecai's garment of sad-colored cloth and closed her eyes.

“There is a law, a terrible law—have you not heard of it?—that no one, either man or woman, may come into the king's presence and live except such as he calls, or those to whom he holds out the sceptre of his clemency;

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and I—woe is me!—I have not been bidden to the king these many days. And I am afraid!”

“Nevertheless, thou wilt go unbidden,” answered Mordecai. “Think well of what I have said, my child, and be brave and very courageous, for so shalt thou be blessed, and it may be that Jehovah shall deliver thee, even as He delivered His servant Daniel from the wrath of the king and from the jaws of the lions.”

The queen drew a deep, sobbing breath.

“Go thou,” she said, “and gather all the Jews that are in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day. I also and my maidens will fast, and so I will go to the king. And if I perish, I perish!”

On the third day thereafter Esther bade her fainting women put on her the robes of state, and the diadem which the king himself had once set upon her head. And when all was finished she stood among them, tall and pure as a stately lily. Like a white flower, also, was her face, and her eyes burned beneath their curved lashes like distant stars.

Then, with her trembling maidens following in her wake, as became a great queen, she passed out from her chamber, and with stately tread walked toward the great Hall of Columns, where sat the king in audience, surrounded by his guards.

Now she had passed under the great portico, where swallows darted in and out with wild, sweet cries to their nests in the carven rafters, and anon she moved under the darkling shadows of the vast square columns. She paused at length near one of the great winged lions of the king's antechamber, a voiceless prayer to Elohim, the Hebrew's God, rising from her white lips. Within, the slanting sun struck sparks of splendor from the gemmed throne and from the waiting swords of the executioners stationed on either side of the dais. And now she could see her husband's dark face

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beneath the kingly tiara; he was frowning as if with surprise and displeasure, as his eye fell upon the little procession advancing toward the throne.

“Who is this?” he demanded sharply, “who thus appears before me unbidden?”

The queen’s slight figure swayed toward him a little, like a tall, white flower upon its stalk; yet in that supreme moment she thought only that she was once more in the presence of the man she loved. Her eyes, deep and wonderful as the eyes of a glorified spirit, rested full upon him.

Slowly the king raised his golden scepter tipped with a great jewel that blazed like a lesser sun in that shaded place.

And Esther touched the scepter of the king’s clemency, her eyes still upon his, questioning him, pleading with him, adoring him.





XXV



IN the days of Xerxes a man might love a beautiful woman, but he would not on that account rely upon her word nor trust her honor. To do so was considered a mark of senility or absolute imbecility. Nevertheless, the King of Media and Persia as he looked into the face of his queen felt a sudden lightening of the gloom which he had for so many days harbored within his breast. He needed not, he told himself, to ask her any further questions. He knew deep down in some unsounded depth of his consciousness that she was true, and, knowing this, his unworthy suspicions slunk away like cowed tigers.

He arose from his royal seat and took her by the hand, while all in that fateful chamber set eyes of wonder, hate, or scorn upon her fair, pallid face.

“You would ask a boon of me, my queen,” he said, his eyes begging forgiveness of hers. “Tell me without fear what it is, and it shall be thine, even were it the half of my kingdom.”

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And Esther, not unmindful of the poisonous gaze of Haman, who stood beside the dais, and of the others, many of whom by this time knew her ill-guarded secret, spoke with a right queenly dignity.

"If it seem good to the king," she said, in her beautiful voice, and in the high Persian which she spoke with exquisite perfection, "let the King's Majesty and Haman, the counselor of the king, come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared in my house."

The request was exceeding strange, inasmuch as it was not according to custom or precedent for any queen, with the single exception of the all-powerful queen mother, to entertain the king. As for Haman, his broad face became scarlet with surprise. To be invited by the queen, in person, to eat and drink in the sacredly private royal house with the king—this transcended all former honors meted out to him. He gazed with round eyes of animal curiosity at his royal master, who in his turn was looking searchingly, albeit with great gentleness, into the pleading face his queen uplifted to his.

Something in her deep eyes begged him to assent without question; to wait for the unsealing of the mystery. And anxious to make amends, he repulsed the ready question that leaped to his lips.

"'Tis no boon you ask of me, Queen of Persia and Media,"—and this he said deliberately for the ears of those who stood by—"but a boon conferred. Right glad am I to accept your proffered hospitality. As for Haman, he shall speak for himself."

But the great minister, usually so profuse with speech and compliment, seemed stricken dumb in the presence of the woman whose life he had successfully plotted against.

The king eyed his chief adviser curiously, the while he still held the beautiful, fair hand of the queen in his.

"How is this?" asked the king sharply, "that you mouth

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and mumble your words like a stupid boy? But perchance you are overcome by the honor. See that you present yourself in due season at this banquet which the queen has caused to be prepared for us two this day."

Then he conducted his queen quite to the outer terrace, where he gave her into the hands of her half-fainting and terrified maids. And he smiled kindly upon them, supposing that he knew all the reason for their pallor and the redness of their eyes.

"The swords of my executioners," quoth the king, "are not for lovely women, but for such as would render their lives and honor insecure."

And this saying of the king's, and the pressure of his great hand comforted and sustained Esther, so that she walked bravely with her maids under the myriad eyes which stared, and within sound of the buzzing whispers which followed her quite to her own door.

And yet she had failed utterly in what she had set out to do.

Mordecai had bidden her make supplication for her life and the lives of her people before the king. And the king had received her graciously and granted her the boon unasked. Why had she not flung herself at his feet and told him all?

She could not have answered the question, and, woman-like, she was glad that Mordecai could not ask it.

"I will tell the king all to-day, and beg of his clemency my life and the lives of my people," she told herself with a sob. Then she thought of the man Haman, who had bought her and her nation with a price, and hot anger waked up within her, that righteous indignation which acts upon the blood like a cordial, and wakens all the courage and strength of purpose of the soul.

The banquet which Queen Esther caused to be served in her house that day was a memorable one. And the queen

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herself, clad in white and pale violet, with great clusters of the royally humble flowers at her breast and in her hair, played the hostess with a grace and propriety which amazed the king. If he had ever thought of his young wife in the light of an exquisite but artificial product of Hegé's culture he knew himself to be mistaken. She had not been wholly unused to the society of clever and cultivated men in the humble house of Mordecai; and the modest yet brilliant wit of her replies, and the perfect poise of her stately young person filled Xerxes with pride. He was glad, too, that Haman could see her thus. The great counselor must henceforth recognize his royal mistress as being more than a mere figurehead demanded by the policy of state and the precedent of kings. She was a regally beautiful and intelligent woman, and the king openly gloried in her. But what was the request hid beneath this brilliant show of hospitality? A change of residence, perhaps; more liberty in choosing her attendants; perchance, something more important, more fateful still. The king studied her brilliant face quietly in the intervals between the courses of the viands. When at last the sweets and wines were set forth, and the attentive slaves had retreated to a little distance, and the harpists, hid behind a screen of rare blossoming plants played softly, he bent forward and spoke to his queen.

"Tell me," he said, "what is it that you would ask of me, for I know that you have not told me all that is in your heart, my Esther. If you will not tell me, how shall I grant it? I can only repeat what I have already said—anything, to the half of my kingdom, which lieth within my power to give, is yours."

And again Esther's courage failed her, as she remembered the terrible law of the Medes and Persians which it was not in the king's power to change or alter. He loved her; she was once more sure of it; every glance of his blue eyes, every tender smile of admiration spoke eloquently of

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his affection. And how would he stiffen with sick horror when told that he had been tricked into selling her life with the lives of thousands of his faithful subjects. And would he not reproach her bitterly for having withheld the words, few and simple, which might have saved them both?

"I—," she faltered, and all the sweet color ebbed from her cheeks and lips, leaving her marble pale, like a lovely, piteous statue of grief. "I would that the king and—Haman—if I have found favor in the king's eyes—will come to-morrow to the banquet which I will set forth; and to-morrow I—will do as the king has said."

And with this the king was forced to be content, though he thought he had guessed what it was she feared to tell him, and he smiled upon her with eyes full of adoration.

"To-morrow, also, I will break bread with you, queen of my heart and of my kingdom, and to-morrow you shall tell me all that is in your heart."

He meaningly excluded his privy counselor, for he did not desire his company. But the queen astonished him beyond measure by her look and tone as she made answer, bowing low before him.

"I thank the king for his gracious favor, and let it not be forgotten that Haman also must be present."

These words of the queen's placed the capstone on the lofty pinnacle of self-esteem upon which Haman balanced himself with unsteady feet. He had drunken more of the queen's wine than was good for a discreet man, and had reached the point where he talked fast and loud, praising the queen's beauty to her face, and boasting of his own taste in women, and of his exceeding wealth and grandeur and the splendor of his house. He was on the point of inviting the king and queen to a banquet in his own garden pavilion, which he declared was built in the pure Grecian style and boasted examples of the finest sculptures brought from Athens at the time of its demolition, when Esther arose, and

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with a gesture full of dignity commanded the counselor's outer garments to be fetched.

"To-morrow," she said coldly, "at the same hour, I trust that you will honor me with your presence."

And Haman went forth, flushed, magnificent, filled with arrogant pride; before him ran pages; behind him walked a score of men-at-arms and half a score of lackeys, all gay in scarlet and gold. A great man, a successful man; every head bowed before him; and so he came to the King's Gate and passed through it, though it was not the straightest way to his own house. He had been told that Matacas, the Jew, had given over his public mourning, and once more sat at his post of office which had not as yet been given to another. Would the Jew cringe in his presence like a whipped cur? Would he crawl, and cry, and beg for mercy at the hands of Haman, the magnificent?

The keeper of the royal seal did not even raise his hollow eyes from his work at the approach of the gay retinue, and Haman, unable to contain his rage, shouted to him in drunken fury:

"Ha, Jew! get you back to your ashheap and sackcloth! And if ashes have failed you, I will even command my servants to cast forth the refuse from my kitchens that you may grovel therein, as you did yesterday."

The Hebrew, who was inscribing a scroll of parchment with many fine square characters of the cuneiform writing, did not raise his eyes at this insulting diatribe. He proceeded, instead, to close and deliberately seal the document with his usual precise care, impressing upon the purple wax the image of the King's Majesty doing battle with a lion.

"Do you hear me, dog-faced swine of a Jew, condemned to death by torture?" hissed the counselor, "or are your ears stuffed with ashes, and deafened with the useless wailing of your race? Ha! I shall soon see you suffering the torments of death, and I shall spit upon you!"

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And he swept on, grinding his teeth in futile anger before the lofty dignity of the man who continued steadfast in his duty in the face of certain ruin and death.

Arrived at his own house, he assembled his family and certain relatives of mean station and little fortune, parasites and hangers-on to be found in every great house, pensioners all upon its lavish hospitality; and ever slavishly ready to chant praises and laudations like the chorus of a Greek comedy. To this company the great Haman discoursed at length, reviewing wordily his marvelous career with its almost unbelievable good fortune. He mentioned in due order and with many boastful words the number of his stalwart sons, the beauty and high station of Zarara and other lesser consorts, the plethoric condition of his treasuries, the vast extent of his vineyards and gardens, the myriads of his servants and slaves, all of which, he declared, had been heaped upon him because of his distinguished merits and his indispensable services to the king.

“Even the queen is not insensible to my greatness, and the wisdom of my words, and the comeliness of my countenance,” he went on, “for to-day she made a banquet for the king, and invited no other but myself. And to-morrow she insists that I again dine with her and the king. Yet all this pleases me not, while I see daily that despicable Jew, Matacas, sitting in the King’s Gate.”

“Not long will Haman, the magnificent, be troubled by the sight of his enemy,” said one of the sycophants, who had, to a man, listened with the flattering attention of those who by so doing earn good food and soft beds and showy raiment. “In less than a twelvemonth the Jew, Matacas, must needs perish with the rest of his scurvy race.”

“’Tis too long a life for so vile a malefactor,” muttered Haman; “and the man may give me the slip at the last. He is capable of sheltering himself even under the king’s throne—*the dog!*”

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Zarara, who had listened alike to the fulminations and self-gratulations of her lord with the tolerant smile of a petted wife, laid her jeweled hand upon his arm.

"Why does my lord longer permit this one drop of bitterness to spoil the cup of his pleasures?" she murmured. "If Haman be thus powerful to mold the royal will, let him ask of the king the life of the man who daily doeth him despite, and let this despicable Jew be the first victim of that holocaust of death which will shortly swallow his race."

"Ay, your counsel is ever good, my Zarara. You and no other shall also tell me how to kill the Jew, so that all the world may know what it means to a man to offend Haman."

The men and women who fed daily of his bounty shuddered as they heard these ominous words, and felt the dire glance of those rolling eyes; but they smiled as best they might with stiffened lips, and murmured a weak applause.

Zarara sneered at them openly, for she tolerated their presence in her house, as a woman must tolerate many things which she hates. And she looked boldly into the flushed and swollen face of her lord, whom she also secretly despised as a rash fool and braggart.

"Let my lord elevate the Jew to a position in the world, where all must look up to him," she said softly, and showed her even teeth in a sly smile.

"Elevate the Jew! What mean you, woman?" roared Haman, ready on the instant to fall into a foaming rage.

Zarara laughed outright.

"It pleases my lord to affect the wit of the witless to-day," she said. "A man may be elevated upon a gibbet, so that all who pass by are forced to look up to him."

"Ha, ha! Good, very good! I catch the wit and wisdom of your suggestion, my peerless Zarara. Let such a gibbet be made forthwith. Let us, by all means, elevate the Jew! Ha, ha! Let us lift him on high so that all the world

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will be forced to recognize his station. Good—excellent! Go forth, Prexaspes, and gather workmen on the instant. Let me hear the sound of the hammers within the hour. And hold, Prexaspes, that we may properly elevate this Jew—ha-ha!—let the gallows be builded fifty cubits high, not a cubit less! All Shushan shall see it; the world shall hear of it—a gallows-tree fifty cubits high! Ha! what a tree of death! How will the birds of prey circle about its loathsome carrion! How will the populace gape and shudder at its foot! How will the Queen of Persia and Media hang that proud head of hers in shame before it! Go, Prexaspes, and let there be instant despatch, for to-morrow my lofty tree must bear fruitage!”

But the lady Zarara had grown pale and ever more bloodless as this wild harangue sounded in her ears. She stood up and stretched out her hands imploringly.

“Stay, Prexaspes!” she ordered sharply. “I did but jest, my lord. I did not mean it. You cannot do this thing! You shall not! Listen, I entreat you. If the Jew, Matacas, is of kin to the queen, do you not see that the king will not suffer him to be harmed? Stay, you must listen!”

“Nay; the word has been spoken, woman. And the word of Haman is like unto the word of the king himself; it cannot be eaten; it cannot be lightly set aside. Nay, my Zarara, you cannot hold me back from my destiny now. The gods have singled me out for lofty distinction. *I may yet sit upon the throne*—who shall say that I may not? Even now I near the zenith of my glory! Go, Prexaspes, and fail not to execute all my commands.”

“‘Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad,’” murmured Zarara, and bowed her head to the God-decreed event, whose chill shadow she seemed to feel approaching with the fateful morrow.



XXVI



DATHAN, Prince of Edom, had been absent from the imperial capital for nearly a year when news of the edict of the king concerning the Hebrew race came to him in distant Greece, where Mardonius and Artabazus, with a picked army of three hundred thousand men, were endeavoring as best they might to retrieve the cowardly flight of Xerxes and the subsequent demoralization of the Persian arms.

Athens had now been occupied a second time, and the Athenians, failing to receive the promised support from Sparta, were on the point of accepting the terms Mardonius offered in behalf of Xerxes. Attica, it was stipulated, with the other states of northern Greece, most of which were thoroughly cowed, must be bound up under a single government and become in effect a satrapy of Persia.

It was thought that nothing could prevent the success of this policy, when unexpectedly a death and a succession changed the whole aspect of affairs. Cleombratus, the re-

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gent for the young son of Leonidas, died, and the ambitious and patriotic Pausanius became regent in his stead. He at once, by means known only to his confidential advisers, secured the wavering allegiance of Sparta; and in an incredibly short time Mardonius was informed of an aggressive army of nearly a hundred thousand Greeks on the march toward Bœotia, to which he had prudently—or imprudently—retired upon the succession of Pausanius.

At this critical juncture of affairs the Persian general sent for Nathan, and in a few cogent words laid the situation before him. "We are here," he said to the Hebrew prince, "in the midst of a hostile country, far from a dependable source of supplies, and with ranks depleted by constant desertions and divers sicknesses incident to long campaigns. We must shortly engage this new army of the Greeks upon their own territory, and Ahura-Mazda alone knows what the event will prove. I shall do what I may; yet I am but mortal, and my breast not less vulnerable than the meanest of my soldiers. If I am killed—and I cannot rid myself of the haunting conviction that I shall never again look upon the face of my wife, nor hold my children in my arms—Artabazus alone will be left. He cannot hold my army together, and I see a great carnage. There is no fleet, no resource."

The great general stopped short under the flaring torches, his pallid face and wild, haggard eyes showing clearly in the wavering light.

Nathan knew well that Mardonius had spared himself in nothing, that he had spent long hours in study of his maps and maneuvers, while others carelessly amused themselves around their camp-fires, or slept under the scant shelter of their dew-rotted tents.

He knew, also, that what his general had said was true, with the added fact that while the Persians stood for a cause abandoned by their king, the Greeks fought for their very

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national life, their wives, their children, and their homes. It was to be an unequal conflict, and the issue could hardly be doubtful.

He bowed his head mutely before his superior officer, his heart full of a bitterness and despair which he made no effort to conceal.

Mardonius surveyed his aide keenly, bethinking him of an unheeded rumor pertaining to some new edict of the king's, which might, nevertheless, seriously affect a large portion of his army.

"What is this I hear concerning the edict against the Hebrews?" he asked. "The writing was posted according to the orders of the king; but I confess that my mind has been upon other matters. It just occurs to me that you are of that race."

"The edict commands the complete annihilation of our nation in a day," Nathan informed him without waste of words; "that day to occur within the twelvemonth."

"But what is the cause of this—this fresh blunder on the part of Xerxes—for I must needs call it so, when many of our most intrepid soldiers are Jews?"

Nathan shook his head.

"I cannot tell," he groaned. "And the sword will do bloody work in the palace itself. There be those in high places who must perish with the rest."

Mardonius was silent for a space; then he struck a resounding blow upon his burnished shield, which hung from the central support of his tent.

"What matters it?" he cried harshly. "I and all my thousands may be slaughtered like sheep and lie unburied in the wilderness, our bones whitening under alien suns; Xerxes will still drink wine in his palaces, and solace himself with his wives in soft dalliance. Yet the sword will drink deep of his heart in the end. This I know, even as I know that I am to die alone and unwept. Go, Nathan, to this silken

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monarch of ours and tell him the army he abandoned is in dire peril; that he must at once send men, weapons, supplies—all things needful, or Greece is lost to Persia; and with Greece will go all territory on the farther side of the straits: Macedonia, Pæonia, and Thrace will throw off the yoke of the great king; then let him beware lest Asia follow. I have spoken.”

That night Nathan started once again on the long, perilous journey, which could have but one outcome, he thought, since little remained to cheer him in the land of his birth. Yet about his neck he still wore the engraved gem given to him by Amytis, the daughter of Xerxes. And at night, by lonely camp-fires in rocky wildernesses, or by day when he rode long hours in silence, followed by his no less silent horsemen, the thought of the charming face of the princess recurred to his reveries, where he found the loved features of Hadassah becoming ever more dim and shadowy.

Scarcely had the little band of Persian horsemen set foot on the farther side of the Hellespont, when news of the disastrous battle of Plataea overtook them. Mardonius had been slain, read these despatches, and the Persian camp had been taken with terrible carnage. Artabazus alone with his forty thousand men had escaped; and of the three hundred thousand troops with Mardonius, all had scattered in a night to be cut down everywhere by the triumphant Greeks.

Thus did the unseen powers which rule the affairs of kings, armies, and individuals write in great letters of blood the end of Persian dominion in that part of the world.

And it was with this sinister news that the Jew, Nathan, the Prince of Edom, so called, came before Xerxes on the day in which he had banqueted with Esther, his queen.

The king heard all in silence; then he dismissed the envoys of the dead Mardonius, and himself retired to his bed-chamber, where he presently commanded his attendants to leave him alone.

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“I will sleep,” he said, “and forget all that troubles me.”

But sleep came not at his bidding; instead the sounds of battle and carnage sounded in his ears; the groans of the dying, and the shouts of those that slew. All was lost; Athens would once more defy his power in insolent beauty; the false gods of the pagans would again rear their lofty temples under the blue skies of Greece. Then his roving thoughts centered themselves upon his queen, and upon the dark-eyed Hebrew prince who once had loved her. He remembered the words of his edict against these same Hebrews, and he cursed himself amid the shadowy curtains of his great, golden bed, as he bethought him that he had thus condemned to slaughter many thousands of brave soldiers, and that the needless massacre would still further weaken his shattered army.

Why had he done this thing? He reviewed once more the specious arguments of Haman, and these now sounded weak and unconvincing in the shadow of this greater disaster to his kingdom. Why slay ten thousand men, with women and children uncounted? Why bring down a myriad curses upon his head, which appeared even now to be accursed? Suddenly the gloom of his bedchamber became strangely alive with faces—white faces, wan, agonized, appealing; some convulsed in the death struggle; others fierce with anger. Their eyes pierced his closed eyelids. And horror of horrors! among them he saw the face of his queen—of Esther, all color gone from her lips and cheeks, her eyes filled with piteous reproaches fixed full upon him. She was about to ask a boon—a boon; and he could not grant it!

The king sprang from his bed with a great oath, his face covered with the cold sweat of agony.

“Bring lights!” he shouted.

And when once more the golden vine of Samos, which hung its jeweled clusters above his bed, shone in the light

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of the silver lamps, and the sculptured bowl of Theodorus stood at his elbow filled with refreshing drink of honey and lime juice mingled with snow, the king ordered the scribes, who waited his bidding night and day, to bring the scrolls containing the annals of court life. These consisted mainly of accounts of the arrivals and departures of great princes and their retinues; and of matters pertaining to the fitting out of commissions appointed to visit the various provinces, and of the reports of these commissions. There were also full accounts of the frequent wars and revolts; and lighter records of hunting parties, with the full tally of the animals killed—all set forth with much fulsome flattery interspersed in each chronicle concerning the Great King, the King of kings, the Ruler of peoples afar off, who was by the light of his imperial person nearly related to Ahura-Mazda and all other divinities, whose existence was thus vaguely acknowledged by the court chroniclers.

More than once had the king's sleepless hours been whiled away in the hearing of these records, which were kept sacredly closed in a great chest of sandalwood, covered with plates of gold and enriched with precious stones; with the result that in the end the royal listener had been lulled soundly to sleep by the monotonous reading of the scribes, who held themselves ever ready to drop their voices to a drowsy murmur, when once the eyelids of the divine one began to droop.

On this occasion the scribe who had been chosen for the honorable post of reader to the King's Majesty caused many rolled parchments to be fetched into the royal bedchamber; then he bowed himself before the monarch, who scowled blackly at the winking clusters above his head, as though he feared a reappearance of the haunting faces of his slain army.

"Will it please the king that I read to him of the excellent glory of his Greek campaign; and of the great bridge,

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the chief wonder of the universe, which the lord of the whole earth caused to be built across the Hellespont?" inquired this functionary gravely.

But Xerxes flung out a hasty gesture of denial.

"I will hear of no wars to-night," he said. "And it must be also written that the bridge was swept away with the army. I would not that my son should hear such writings after I am laid in the tomb already waiting for me beside my father, Darius; but there shall be no lying records of my reign. What have you there?"

"Let the King of kings live forever!" exclaimed the scribe, who chanced to be a Median. "I have here many records of the excellent kingdom of the Achæmenidæ, relating to the rise of Cyrus, who became conqueror of the whole world under the guidance of Auramazda, and also of his sons Cambyses and Smerdis, and the strange story of the false Smerdis, the Magian, who usurped the throne, and was himself slain by Darius, the son of Hystaspes, who was the father of Xerxes, the divine one."

"Ay, read of Darius, my father," commanded the king. "Perchance his spirit may communicate with mine, and shed some light upon this dim page of my life."

So the scribe read from a certain parchment, bound with purple bands and clasped with a great turquoise set in the red gold of Egypt:

"And it came to pass after Darius, the king, came to the city, carrying with him the head of the false Smerdis in a sack of goatskin, that he came to the palace, where was the vacant throne. And as he walked through the rooms of the royal house his body shone with the divine light, so that all they that looked knew beyond peradventure that he was the true and rightful king. And he sat him down upon the throne and commanded that the head of the pretender who had falsely seized the throne and the wives of Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, should be set upon a pole, and that the

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pole should be fastened to the battlements of the king's gate. And when this was done he commanded the wife of the false Smerdis, who had also been the wife of Cambyses, to be fetched.

“And presently the Queen Atossa was brought before him. She was the daughter of Cyrus, and very beautiful, being then in the full flower of her youth, though she had been twice married unwillingly—once to her own father's son, again to the Magian who represented himself to be Smerdis, the brother of Cambyses.

“‘Tell-me,’ said Darius, ‘did you not know that the man whose head is now set upon the king's gate was not Smerdis, the son of Cyrus?’

“And the queen answered him: ‘I knew indeed and right well that the man who pretended to be the younger son of Cyrus was not Smerdis, my brother. How could it be otherwise? But he caused me to be made a strait prisoner in the royal house, and I could do nothing, being a woman. But I am glad that you have slain him, and that you are king.’

“Darius looked steadfastly upon the daughter of Cyrus, and when he saw that she was of a queenly bearing, and that her hair was yellow, like ripe wheat, and that she returned his look with a gaze of blue fire, he arose, and took her by the hand.

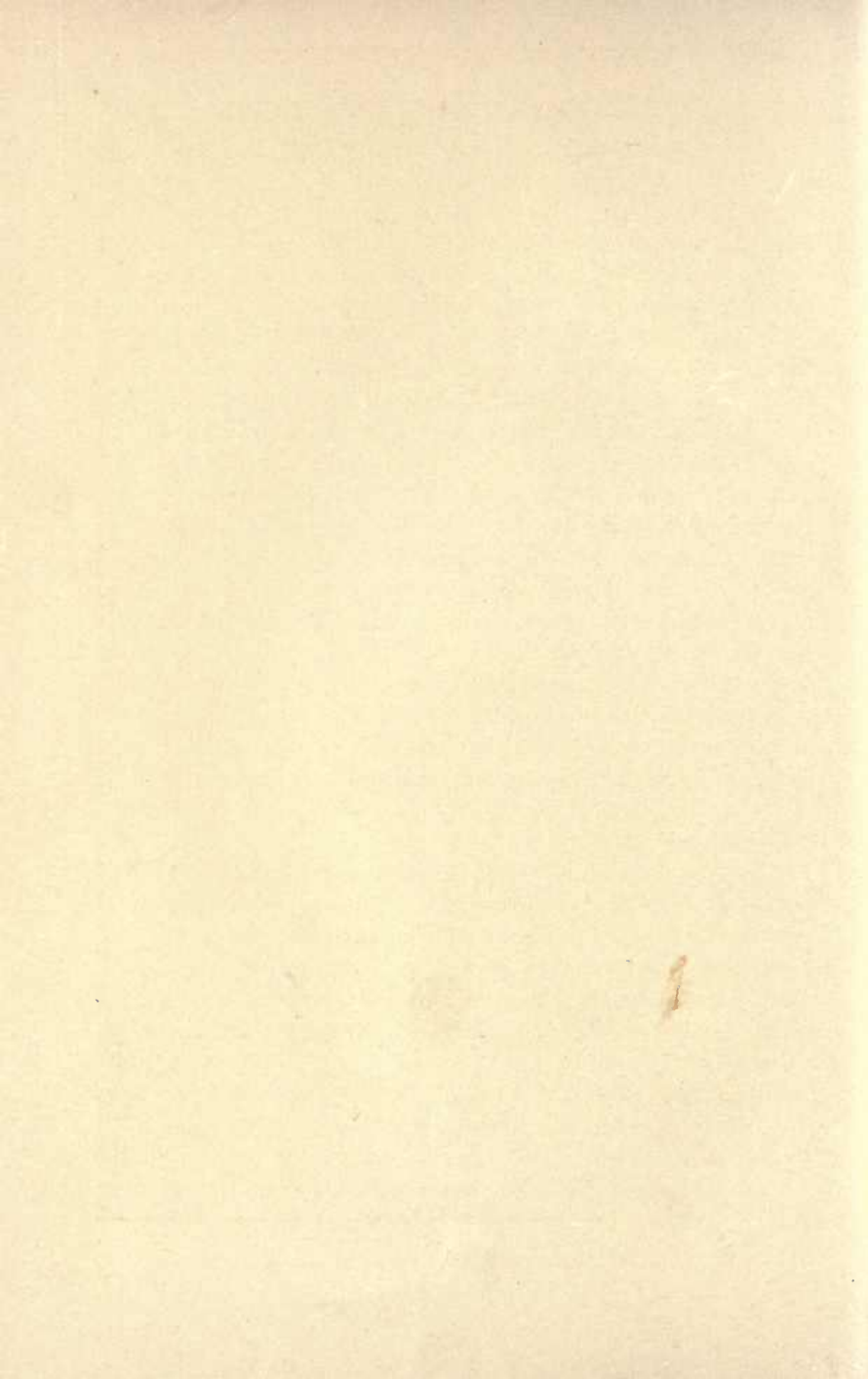
“‘As yet,’ he said, ‘you have been no true wife nor queen; but I will make you both.’ And with that, he lifted the crown from his own head and set it upon hers; and so Atossa became his queen, and the mother of his son, who was called Xerxes.”

The voice of the scribe was already sinking to a soothing murmur; but the king's harsh voice roused him to a realization of the fact that the divine one was not yet inclined for sleep.

“Read on,” commanded the king, “and let not sleep



“ ‘TWERE MEET THAT I SOMETIMES LISTEN TO THESE RECORDS,’
MUTTERED XERXES.”



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overpower your eyelids till it has visited mine, else I shall find ways to keep you waking."

At this dark hint, which presaged evil unknown yet terrible, the scribe's voice became loud and full, and he read from many scrolls concerning the doings of Darius, the father of Xerxes, and the king listened attentively, his eyes wide and sleepless as the fierce eyes of the lions which haunted the distant mountains of Lauristan.

He read of the massacre of the Magian priests, who were slain with the sword, because they had attempted to set one of their number upon the Persian throne; and of the subsequent labors of Darius in rebuilding the temples of Ahura-Mazda, which the false king had destroyed. Under Darius, and with his assistance, the Jews had resumed the building of their sacred temple at Jerusalem, where sacrifices were to be continually made and prayers offered to the God of Heaven for the life of the King of Persia and his sons. "For such," read the chronicle, "is the bond which unites pure Zoroastrianism with the worship of Jehovah."

"Cease to read of Darius," ordered Xerxes. "Turn now to the records of my own reign, and search out and read in my hearing all that has to do with the Jews, whom my father so honored."

And the scribe read of the Jews in many scrolls; how they had served the king in war and in peace, and of the revenues which they brought to the king's treasuries, of the troops levied and the victories won by them. Mention was made, by name, of Nathan, Prince of Edom, who in his own person led a company of Immortals over the pass, and so defeated the Greeks at Thermopylæ.

There was also a brief record pertaining to Matabas, chief of the palace scribes; and to this the king listened with clouded brow.

"Now there was a certain eunuch in the service of the great king who was called Teresh (read the scribe), and this

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man conceived in his heart a deadly hatred of the king's excellent majesty, so that he thought of nothing in his madness but how he might destroy the sacred life of the divine one. And Teresh spoke also to another of his fellow servants, who was called Bighthana; and he said, 'Let us now slay the king, and so shall we be avenged of all our wrongs that the king has done us; and we will also lay hands upon the golden vine of Samos which is in the king's bedchamber, and strip from it all the jewels which form its clusters, and these, with other spoils, will we take from the dead body of Xerxes and flee into the mountains, and from thence to some distant province where we will enjoy the fruits of the king's vine in peace and affluence.' And it came to pass that this base and murderous talk of these slaves came to the ears of the wise Matacas, the Jew, who is also the keeper of the royal seal; and he reported the matter to the king. And Xerxes, that great and wise monarch, the King of kings, the Lord of many peoples afar off, caused the malefactors to be crucified forthwith. And may a similar evil fate overtake all who in the wickedness of their hearts shall now or hereafter plot any mischief against the king's Excellent Majesty!"

"Hold!" commanded the king, drooping his great head forward, that it rested upon his breast.

The scribe's droning monotone instantly ceased.

"'Twere meet that I sometimes listen to these records," muttered Xerxes, "lest I forget my indebtedness to those who serve me. Tell me now what reward of gold, estates, or dignities, was given to Matacas in exchange for the king's life?"

The scribe searched hastily among the chronicles that followed. At last he said:

"There is no record, my lord king, of any reward having been granted to the Jew."

"And I did not even thank him," said the king.

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It was at that instant, while the scribes and the chamberlains trembled in foolish terror before the king's frowning face, that a sound of stir and bustle in the anterooms without was heard.

"Who dares thus to break in upon my hours of rest?" demanded Xerxes, looking up from his unhappy reverie.

And the chief chamberlain, with a face full of astonishment and doubt, prostrated himself before the presence and said that Haman, the counselor, waited without and demanded audience with the king upon a matter of moment.





XXVII



“**B**ID Haman come in,” ordered the king. “There is no moment certain to a man save the one which flits by him oft unnoticed and unemployed. I will seek counsel of my minister, who is ever most ready to serve me with words of wisdom.”

So presently Haman entered with great pomp and circumstance of eunuchs clad in the gold and scarlet liveries of his house, which put to shame the sober purple and white of the royal equeries. The counselor was clothed as if for a banquet, and all his bulky person winked with many jewels and flashed with burnished gold, so that the king was forced to turn aside his eyes, wearied by reason of sleeplessness.

“Ah, my Haman! You glitter like a newly scoured pot,” exclaimed the king, by way of greeting. “And I perceive there is no more sleep in those ferret eyes of yours than in my own. What now has banished kind slumber from the pillow of the wise Haman?”

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The big man puffed in the midst of his curled and perfumed beard—for he had come in haste—and bowed low as he said that a matter of grave import had effectually banished from him the desire of sleep.

“I shall rest sweetly,” he prophesied confidently, “when once the King’s Majesty has heard my matter and set thereon the seal of his approval.” He added that he was glad that scribes were present, since a warrant would be required straightway.

The king appeared ill pleased with this saying.

“’Tis a matter of your own business, then, which you required me to wake from sleep to sanction,” he said sourly. “I am, it would appear, little more than a seal in the hand of my chief minister, to be employed when the need arises, be it night or day.”

Haman hastened to assure his royal master, with many wearisome repetitions of the fulsome phrases most in vogue, that he had first taken the pains to ascertain that the Excellent Majesty of the king was not sleeping, as was, indeed, to be expected and hoped at that hour of the night. And it was not until assured by the officers of the royal bedchamber that majesty waked that he had ventured to request audience on a matter which admitted of no delay.

“Since you are here, my Haman, and doubtless filled with wisdom to the point of running over,” quoth the king, “I would myself profit by your presence. There is a certain matter which escaped my attention at the time it occurred, but which I must now make good without further delay. It concerns a subject of mine who has been of the greatest possible use to me.”

The magnificent figure of the counselor was observed to sparkle and flash anew as he bent forward the better to attend the words of the king.

“It will be difficult,” pursued Xerxes, knitting his brows thoughtfully, “for me to reward this man as I would like,

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for his services to me and my kingdom have been so great that they cannot be paid for in gold, slaves, or estates. Nevertheless, I would show him some extraordinary honor, something which will set him apart at once and forever from the common run of court beneficiaries, and this must be done in the sight of all Shushan, for the king's honor, like the crown itself, is something to be worn before the eyes of the nation."

"My lord, the king, is ever most gracious to his subjects," purred Haman, his coarse mouth smiling, his greedy eyes rolling with anticipated delight.

"The man of whom the king speaks can be no other than myself," he was thinking, and swelled with pride till he resembled one of the great bladders of wind which the lads of Persia cast from hand to hand and buffeted with the bat.

Xerxes observed his adviser keenly, the scornful saying of his daughter, Amytis, recurring to his mind. And as he looked, the man's arrogant thoughts became clear and plain to him, as if writ upon parchment; and with the understanding arose a wave of royal scorn for the greedy sycophant, who waited with open impatience for further rewards from his royal master.

"You love me, do you not, my Haman?" inquired the king gravely, "and you are ever ready to do my bidding—is it not so?"

Haman dropped upon his knees in the fervor of his emotions, as he assured the king of his undying fealty and affection. He became so much in earnest in the course of his protestations that actual tears stood in his glistening eyes, and oozed from his scant lashes.

"May I ever have fresh opportunity to display before the king's Divine Majesty the depth of my devotion to his person," he said, mouthing his words thickly in a way the king was beginning to observe with displeased attention. "If I have served the Lord of the world acceptably in the

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past, let the past be the poor earnest of what I would perform in the future," he went on. "I am the slave of Xerxes! And may Ahura-Mazda and all lesser deities bear witness to my words while I swear it!"

He held up both fat, jeweled hands after the manner of a Zoroastrian priest, and the king, supported upon his elbow, regarded him with an inscrutable expression of countenance.

"You may now arise, my Haman," said the king blandly, after listening a while longer to the somewhat absurd expressions of affection to which his bulky minister was giving blatant utterance. "It must be fatiguing for a man of your weight to remain overlong in the attitude of subservience; and I assure you that you have satisfied me with the number and zeal of your protestations."

Haman got heavily to his feet; but he continued to gaze at the king with the eager yet humble suppliancy of a dog begging a bone.

"The King's Excellent Majesty was speaking of a man—a subject, whom the king was about to reward with some great honor," he suggested.

"I was indeed speaking of such a person," observed Xerxes, with a grave smile. "And it is of this matter of his reward that I would ask of you counsel. What now shall be done for a man whom the king would delight to honor?"

And Haman, bethinking himself of the mountains of gold and silver in his treasuries, and of the houses and vineyards and slaves, and of the beautiful women without number already in his possession, rolled his greenish eyes upon the king.

"There is a custom," he said, "long in use, which provides for death by torture to the person who shall carelessly presume to put on his person the king's purple, or to sit upon his royal charger, or to touch with the hand of familiarity the king's crown; so doth royalty hedge itself about with

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cautious observance. Let now the king command that his richest robes of state be fetched and put on the man whom he would honor above all in his excellent kingdom, and let the king's crown be set upon his head, and let the man ride upon the horse whereon no man save the King's Majesty has ever yet sat, and let the horse, and the crown royal, and the robes of state be given to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, and command that with his own hands the prince shall array the man in the king's excellent glory. Then let the noble prince—whom the king shall name—bring the man honored of the king through the streets of the city, himself leading the horse, and proclaim before him in a loud voice that all may hear, 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor!'

Xerxes stared at Haman yet more thoughtfully. "You have chosen a great honor indeed for the man whom I have in mind," he said at last; "an honor which no man living has ever received at the hand of any Achæmænian king. Be you sure that the fame of the man thus distinguished will reach to the uttermost bounds of the world. Aye, and nations yet unborn will hear of it and say, 'To no other man in all the world has such honor been paid.'"

"'Tis not too distinguished a favor for the man whom the Great King delights to honor," quoth Haman, arrogantly. "And of such a man should it indeed be said of all nations that to no other man in the world has such honor been paid."

"Say you so?" exclaimed the king, looking curiously at the flushed face and shining eyes of his privy counselor. "And what of the noble prince who shall be required to go on foot through the streets of the city, proclaiming the words you have stipulated? Think you not he will resent the office?"

"Nay, my Lord King, the noblest prince in all the king's excellent dominions should be rejoiced to do the king's bid-

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ding, in thus honoring the man of the king's choosing," cried Haman, waxing ever bolder and more confident.

"Ay; doubtless he will be rejoiced beyond measure to so humble himself, more especially if he be a man who has bound himself by an oath to love the King's Majesty in honor and truth and serve him with his life."

Xerxes was thoughtfully silent for a space; then he turned to the scribes, who still waited in the royal bed-chamber, not having received the word of dismissal.

"Write," said the king, "the words of this requisition." And he proceeded to name, in due order, the robes of state, the crown royal, the king's Arabian charger, with full trappings of gold-mounted saddle, bridle, and housings. Also he mentioned certain officers of the royal house, with their equeries, to walk behind, and the royal fan-bearer, bearing the great fan of state, to avert the rays of the midday sun from the head of the man whom the king delighted to honor.

"Is all of this as you would have it, my lord?" he inquired gravely of Haman.

And Haman answered, bowing low to conceal the growing delight and astonishment in his eyes.

"If it seem good to the king, let the man also whom the king delights to honor bear the royal scepter, and let him, for one hour's time, do with it what he will, in extending favor to his friends, and meting out punishment to his enemies."

"For," thought Haman, "so will I, in mine own authority, deal out death and torture to Mordecai the Jew, and royal favor to divers others who will be of use to me later."

"Let it be so written," said the king, turning sharply to his scribes. "And now set down the name of the man whom the king delighteth to honor, and the name also of the king's servant who will rejoice in assisting the king in the bestowment of this honor."

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And the scribes waited, their brushes filled with the purple ink of Sidon poised in air.

“For the man whom the king would thus signally honor, because he has saved the king’s life from the hands of guilty assassins, write Matacas, who is also called Mordecai,” said Xerxes, slowly and without glancing at Haman. “And for the prince who shall lead the royal charger, and proclaim the honor in the exact words stipulated by my wise and prudent counselor, and duly written and set forth, write Haman, the Agagite, son of Hammedetha.”

A curious sound, which was neither a choking cough nor an oath, yet sounded strangely like both, drew the king’s eye to Haman, who was staring with bulging eyes at the writing in which was already set down in legible characters the names spoken by the king.

“You will be greatly rejoiced, my Haman, to perform the service for the man whom the king delighteth to honor,” quoth the king; “have you not already assured me of this?”

“You forget that the man is a dog of a Hebrew, a vile Jew, condemned to death!” snarled the Agagite, forgetting all propriety of speech or manner in his blinding rage.

“The king forgets nothing, son of Hammedetha; but it would appear that the wise and prudent Haman has forgotten many things. Go; the hour is late, and I would sleep perchance, if left to myself. And to-morrow see that you carry out the words of this writing; let nothing of it all escape you. Go to the house of Matacas, and do in all things as is written by the scribes. I shall require a report of the procedure from the master of the king’s horse, who will himself accompany you.”



XXVIII



MORDECAI, the king's scribe and keeper of the royal seal, was in his own house, the hour being sunrise. He had gone up to the roof, after the manner of his people; and there, his face set toward Jerusalem, the distant city, where even then the smoke of the morning sacrifice ascended to Jehovah in purple clouds of incense, he knelt upon his knees, his lips repeating the words of the ancient liturgy appointed to all faithful descendants of Abraham.

Below him spread the shallow-domed roofs of the Persian houses, built one and all of clay and sun-dried bricks of yellowish tint, and swelling with gentle monotony of shape and color to the base of the royal platform whereon the palaces stood, transfigured to an unearthly beauty in the rosy light of dawn. The heart of Mordecai was heavy, for no word had come to him of his kinswoman, the young queen, save that she had gone to the king and had been graciously received by him. It was reported that she had entertained

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at a banquet the King's Majesty and Haman, the great privy counselor, whom Mordecai cursed aloud as the enemy of his people. But he had learned nothing of the result of the meeting between the three, though he had waited late at his post, hoping that Esther would send him word. At the best, he had little hope of any adequate deliverance, seeing that the unalterable word had been spoken, against which there could be no possible repeal. Certain ones might be guarded against the general massacre; others might be permitted to fly to some distant city of refuge, or conceal themselves in their houses till the dreadful day was past; yet their homes and their goods would be forfeit to the crown under the terrible edict of the king.

Hopelessly he prayed, therefore, his tongue falling through long habit into the phraseology of the royal David, who had been wont to address Jehovah in the merciless language of an Eastern warrior. "Consume the enemies of thy people, O Lord, our shield! Consume them in the fierceness of thy wrath that they be seen no more! Let them know that Jehovah reigneth unto the ends of the earth. At evening let them return, and let them make a noise like a dog, and go round about the city. But I will wait upon thee, O God, for thou art my defence against the violent and wicked man. For lo! mine enemy hath digged a pit before me; he hath spread a net for my steps, but he shall himself fall into the midst of it and perish miserably! O Lord, my soul is among lions, deliver thou me up for thy name's sake! Let death and destruction wait upon all them that devise mischief against thy people, and let them go down quickly into hell, for wickedness is in their dwellings! But as for me, I will call upon God. Evening and morning and at noon will I cry aloud, and my God shall hear my voice. Jehovah shall hear me and afflict mine enemies. Thou, O God, shall bring them down into the pit of destruction; the bloody and deceitful man shall not live out half his days; but I will trust in thee!"

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As the scribe's deep, melancholy voice rolled out over the housetops in the clear, roseate air of the morning, many who dwelt near heard it, and muttered prayers to Ahura-Mazda to avert the just curses of the Hebrew; for the inhabitants of Shushan were greatly perplexed by the edict of the king. Albeit certain violent and greedy men were already casting lustful eyes upon the fat properties of the peaceful and law-abiding Jews who dwelt among them, upon their young and beautiful women, also, whom they thought to spare in secret for their own vile purposes.

And so Mordecai continued to pray aloud, beating upon his breast at intervals, and casting ashes upon his hair and beard in the extremity of his anguish. And as he prayed he was not aware of the sound of silver trumpets drawing ever nearer, and of the stepping of many feet, and the excited shouts of children and men and women, who had abandoned the tasks of early morning to run and gape at the spectacle of the king's great counselor borne in a gilded litter by eight Nubian slaves, and followed by a groom leading the king's horse, and many other officials, some riding upon horses, others on foot. And at these some wondered, not knowing wherefore they were come out; others laughed and made a mock of Haman riding like a sick woman in the great gilded litter, and hid from view by shielding curtains of crimson 'broidered with gold.

Within the litter, prone upon his face, Haman, the magnificent, cursed and wept by turns, till in appearance he was like a madman. And so they came at last into the narrow street where dwelt Mordecai, with others of his race, in good houses of stone and brick, built after the pattern of the houses at Jerusalem; with square courtyards walled high from the street, and flat-topped roofs with battlements, where the inhabitants might rest at morning and at evening, and look away toward the far Temple, which Nehemiah, their prophet and prince, had lately completed at Jerusalem.

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And the street was filled with the gay procession from end to end, so that the silver trumpets of the guard, and the clattering of horses, and the speech of those that led them, came up to the roof whereon stood Mordecai, clothed in his garment of harsh sackcloth and with ashes upon his hair and beard.

“Knock upon the Jew’s door,” commanded Haman, giving orders from his litter, “and if the swine open not to us on the instant, I will straightway report to the king that Matacas will not receive honor at the hands of the King’s Majesty.”

The servant of Haman, also an Amalekite, and hence an hereditary enemy of the Jews, knocked loudly upon the door, and there was no answer; because Abihail, who was within, feared to open, thinking her hour was already come.

“Let us go; the Jew refuses to admit us. How then shall we carry out the commands of the king? Nay, I will not tarry longer before the pen of this swine, for I am bidden by the queen to a banquet, and I may not delay to prepare for it.”

At these words of Haman, Melzar, master of the king’s horse, stepped forward. “The great Haman refuses to do the king’s bidding at his peril, and at the imminent peril of us all,” said he; “for of this I have full assurance. We shall all suffer punishment if the writing be not carried out to its smallest letter. We shall gain admittance presently, or failing in this, we must even take the man by force; for to-day he must ride upon the king’s beast, wearing the king’s purple.”

A wicked light leaped up in Haman’s eyes.

“If the Jew be slain in the taking, he may yet ride upon the king’s horse, for I will bind his dead carcass to the saddle-bow, and cover it with the robe of Xerxes.”

But at this murderous suggestion a great shout of anger

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went up from the others; for they feared for their lives to anger the king.

Then Melzar knocked upon the door, not over loudly, but with firm purpose, as of one who must enter, whether or no.

“Open!” he cried, “in the king’s name! For we are come in behalf of the Great King to confer honor upon the man who dwells here!”

Abihail, who stood within, her ear against the door, ran hastily up the stairs leading to the roof, her face purple with haste and the wonder of what she had heard. Mordecai stood yet at his prayers, his face turned toward Jerusalem, the ashes upon his head, and his coarse garment rent in token of his abasement and sorrow.

“Art thou deaf to what passes without?” demanded the old woman, shrilly. “Look! I pray you, over the parapet and behold the street is blocked with men and beasts. They demand entrance to this house in the name of the king!”

Mordecai looked coldly upon the woman; for he was ill-pleased to be disturbed in his converse with Jehovah.

“Go,” he said, “and say that Mordecai, son of Jair, prays to his God at this hour, and may not be disturbed by the emissaries of any lesser king.”

“I am afraid to speak to the men!” wailed Abihail. “And thyself knowest thou hast forbidden me to hold converse with any man. Look, I pray thee, but once, and then tell me if a woman may parley with them that demand entrance to thy house.”

Even as she spoke, her round face blanched with apprehension. The sound of the loud, insistent voice of Melzar could be distinctly heard as he demanded entrance in the name of Xerxes.

Mordecai, wrapping his sackcloth about his gaunt figure, went to the verge of the roof and looked over into the street. And when he saw Haman and the royal fan-bearer, and

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Melzar with the equerries, and the king's horse, led by a man in the king's liveries, he was both amazed and afraid. For, thought he, Haman has devised some mischief against me because I refused to do him obeisance.

"What will you," he cried, "in my poor house? and in this the hour of my devotion to the Highest?"

Melzar looked to Haman to make an answer; but Haman could not, being choked with rage and humiliation.

"We are come, excellent Matacas," quoth Melzar, with great courtesy of speech, and striving as one may who looks upward to a roof level to perform his office with due ceremony, "to confer an honor upon you, in the king's name and at the king's request."

"There is no honor due me," said Matacas, "and it is known to all of you why I mourn. Nevertheless, I will come down."

He stood presently before them in his coarse sackcloth, rent from neck to hem, and with ashes upon his head.

"Come in," he said, "till you have made your matter plain to me."

They came in—all of them, and filled the stone-paved courtyard with glory and color. And all waited for Haman to speak, since upon him rested the king's commission."

And the chief counselor, ruffling himself like a fierce cock, spoke in a loud tone of contempt.

"I was with the king in the night watches," he said, "and we spoke of rewards and punishments—all such matters being referred to me and to my wisdom. 'There is a man,' quoth the King's Majesty, 'who has done me a service, and who has not yet been rewarded therefor. What now shall I do for him?' As is my custom, I asked questions of the king, and learning that the man to be rewarded was of the Hebrew race——"

At this Melzar reminded Haman in a loud whisper that a scribe was even then writing a report of whatever was

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said; whereat Haman breathed a great oath, for he knew not of the scribe.

"I mistake," he corrected himself. "The king did not tell me the man's nationality; but, in my superior wisdom, I knew it; and, knowing also that neither gold, estates, nor titles could mean anything to one whose days are numbered, I suggested that the man wear the king's purple for an hour, and ride upon the king's beast, that the people might know beyond a peradventure that the Great King, the Lord of the whole earth, the Ruler of peoples afar off, will reward each man according to his acts; and that even criminals and Jews may enjoy a portion of the king's favor.

Mordecai looking steadfastly at Haman, as he uttered the half-lying words, perceived clearly that here was some hidden thing, not easily explainable. "Hadassah has told the king of my relationship to her," he thought; but in this he soon saw that he was mistaken.

"The keeper of the king's seal," Haman went on, ever more discourteous in look and gesture, as his rage got the better of his discretion, "was permitted by the gods who look after the swine to scent and uncover a foul carrion—in shape, a conspiracy against the king's life. And as Ahura-Mazda graciously permits even the vultures to serve his ends, so was the Jew, Matacas, allowed to serve the King's Majesty. Therefore, Xerxes took my advice, which I give him freely out of the plentitude of my wisdom, and we are here to carry out the king's will. Go now, Jew, wash the ashes from your beard, for the king's crown must rest upon your doomed head; for one hour, also, you shall wear the king's robe; and, worst mockery of all, I, Haman, chief among all the princes of the kingdom, am chosen to lead the king's horse upon which you shall sit, and proclaim the king's words, which I, and no other, put into his mouth. Go quickly, Jew; for I must needs make haste to a banquet with the queen."

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“First tell me why I am so honored,” demanded Mordecai, more and more amazed, as he recognized the king’s high officials, the chief of the royal wardrobe, with pages bearing the raiment; the keeper of the crown, with the great chest containing the regalia; and most unbelievable of all, the warder of the scepter, the token of kingly power. “I must know,” he said solemnly, “what this means, and why I am thus honored above all men who have ever lived in the kingdom of the Medes and Persians.”

Haman ground his teeth in rage, for all the servants of the king were bowing themselves before Mordecai, as they had done before himself but yesterday.

“I have already told you, Jew,” he raged. “You discovered to the king the murderous eunuchs Teresh and Bigthana—though how this came about I know not, unless you were also concerned with them in the matter, and being a cowardly Hebrew betrayed your confederates.”

Mordecai looked loftily upon Haman, his face irradiated with the singular light of a prophet newly anointed of the Spirit of wisdom.

“Son of Hammedetha,” he said, “I know not why the king, our master, has thus chosen to humiliate you; but this I know, not long will you be permitted to rage unchecked. The blood—as yet unshed—of thousands of innocent persons already follows you, crying out to heaven for justice; and the doom has been pronounced upon your guilty head. Ay, and right speedily shall it fall! Humble yourself; take my sackcloth and put it on, and strew the ashes of mourning upon your head, and pray aloud to the God of heaven, that the doom may yet be averted from you and your house. For our God, unlike the lord of the Medes and Persians, is ever ready to extend mercy and even to revoke his just decrees against the guilty man, if only that man will repent and humble himself.”

“Go, Jew; you waste our time with profane and impu-

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dent babblings!" cried Haman. Yet under all his loud and boastful bluster he felt an icy chill of fear, as the Jew's burning eyes rested upon him.

"Will it please my lord Haman to explain further the king's will regarding the royal scepter?" suggested Melzar.

Haman stamped his foot.

"Let him first obey me," he cried loudly. "Go wash your filth, Jew, lest the king be forced to cast aside the robes which you have polluted."

Mordecai made no answer to this crowning insult of the Agagite. But he withdrew in all dignity to an inner room of his house, where he rid himself of the tokens of mourning and came forth presently clad in a fresh tunic of pure white linen, his noble head bent upon his breast, his long beard, which had of late grown silver white, blanched by the stress of his sorrows and labors, streaming upon it.

Then Haman, with whispered curses, which he dared not utter aloud because of those that stood by with open ears, and also because of the scribe who quickly made report upon his tablets concerning the conduct of the affair, put on Mordecai in due order the royal garments which Babires, chief of the royal wardrobe, handed him one by one out of the baskets in which they had been brought. And first of all he put upon the Hebrew a tunic of fine linen, of purple mixed with white in broad bands, and below the tunic full trousers of a crimson hue; on his feet, the royal pages, at the bidding of Haman, put the Median shoes of a deep saffron color, long and tapering at the toe, buttoned with topazes up the front, and reaching high above the instep. Over the garments thus specified Haman put the Median garment called the candys, made of richest silk, and ample of fold. Already the Hebrew scribe had assumed something of the appearance of royalty; and even Haman in his blind rage felt the effect of his noble presence. The great, clumsy hands of the privy counselor trembled as he laid hold of

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the royal robe, which was worn above all. This garment was fashioned of rich silken stuff, woven in the looms of Egypt, and dyed throughout with the costly purple of Tyre, used only by royalty; about its ample border it was richly wrought with arabesques of gold thread and thickly sewn with pearls and glistening gems. All these rich garments were odorous of precious perfumes, used only by the king, so that the humble place smelled sweetly as a garden of spices.

Abihail, well hidden in the house, yet with her curious old eyes fixed to the crack of a shutter, muttered an amazed prayer beneath her breath, as she saw her master thus invested standing in the midst of the purple carpet which the equerries had spread.

And now the great, gilded chest of sandalwood in which the crown jewels were kept was opened by the officer, and golden bands were put upon the arms of Mordecai, and about his neck a wrought chain of gold holding a great ruby of Ind. About his middle, also, they clasped a broad girdle, winking with many gems, and in the girdle was thrust a short sword, the sheath of which was made of precious jasper, and its hilt of a great amethyst.

Then with bated breath was brought forward a second chest of sandalwood containing the sacred regalia. Haman had begun to breathe short by this, and his broad face was spotted with purple and livid crimson; and great drops of sweat started upon his forehead. But Mordecai, the Jew, stood quite still in his place, his breath coming and going softly; his thoughts lifted to the distant throne of the King of kings, Jehovah, whose mighty hand he thought he could see in all this wonder.

Thus far the monarch's costume, though more magnificent than that of a Persian noble, and differing from it in color, was not in its general appearance unlike that worn by Haman and other dignitaries present. But now the sec-

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ond chest, supported upon the backs of kneeling slaves, was opened, and the royal kitaris was taken forth with reverent hands.

This was a tall, stiff headdress of brilliant purple, slightly swelling from its base to a circular band of gold which surrounded the flat top. Where the tiara rested upon the head was a second twisted band of red gold set with great jewels, which flashed with blinding splendor in the sun, and just above this was the simple fillet or band—the royal diadem proper—of blue, spotted with white. In all the history of the Achæmenian kings no man save the king had worn this crown. To touch it profanely meant death by torture.

Instinctively, Mordecai bowed low before this emblem of a world-wide power, and with mingled bitterness and exaltation of spirit felt upon his head the mighty crown of the king of a myriad of rulers. His appearance was now majestic, and the hushed whispers of comment died to awed silence, as a high official came forward bearing the scepter, a plain rod overlaid with gold, ornamented with the single glowing eye of a great ruby.

“Will it please your gracious majesty to ride?” inquired the master of the horse, kneeling before the man, who, albeit for one short hour, was now invested with all the prerogatives and terrors of the kingly state.

“If it be the king’s pleasure, I will ride,” said Mordecai, in his deep, melancholy voice.

“It is the king’s pleasure that you ride,” muttered Haman, his coarse lips writhing away from his yellow teeth in an agony of humiliation, as he thought of what awaited him in the streets without.

“Does your highness understand that during the hour in which you hold the royal scepter that you have also the power of life and death, and all such other prerogatives as rest in the hand of the one man whose right it is to carry

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the scepter and wear the double crown of Persia and Media?"

It was Melzar who asked the fateful question, for he perceived that Haman had purposely withheld this last token of kingly favor from the Jew; and he hoped that Matacas would use the opportunity to be revenged upon his enemy, whom Melzar also secretly feared and detested.

"Is this the truth, Agagite?" demanded Mordecai, turning to Haman, whose increasing distress was evident to all who looked on.

"It is true," muttered Haman, and he trembled, as he realized for the first time that the hated Jew now held his life and fortune in his grasp.

But Mordecai spoke not at all. He was thinking of many things, but chiefly of whether it were possible for him in this one hour of his authority to do anything for his doomed people. His lips moved in fervent prayer for wisdom and guidance, even while they led forward the Arabian horse, his silken coat glistening in the sun, and placed the pseudo-monarch thereon, with all kingly pomp and circumstance of kneeling slaves, and the abasement of many proud heads. The official fan-bearer and the officer of the royal umbrella, now took their stations as custom prescribed. Haman grasped the bridle of the horse; the officers and equeries of the royal household ranged themselves in due order behind; the door was thrown wide to the street; the final orders were given in low tones; and now the procession—assuredly the strangest in all the world's history—was about to move forward, when suddenly there occurred a singular and wholly unlooked-for circumstance.



XXIX



THE night interview of Haman with the king and its astonishing sequence flew from mouth to mouth in royal Shushan, and the first beams of the rising sun had scarce gilded the stately façades of the many palaces before everyone knew that for one hour Matacas,

the keeper of the royal seal, would be in semblance and in power, also, King of Media and Persia. No such extraordinary honor had been vouchsafed to any prince, potentate, or ruler in the past; and there were not lacking those who made dismal prognostications of evil resulting from the king's rash action. Others shrewdly foresaw great and sudden changes in the royal policy presaged in this signal honor paid to one of the doomed Hebrews. The kingly favor was ever most capricious, so they that stood to-day on the topmost pinnacle of wealth and glory might to-morrow be numbered with the dishonored dead, their bodies exposed to public ignominy, their estates confiscate to the crown, or given to some new favorite.

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In the chamber of Amytis, daughter of Xerxes, all the details of this latest bit of palace gossip were being discussed in low tones by the tire-women and ladies in attendance, as they set forth the various articles requisite for the use of their young mistress. To-day the princess was to be formally presented to Mathistan, Prince of Ecbatana, who had come with alacrity at the king's bidding to fetch home his bride; so the toilet about to be made was a most magnificent one, and the tire-women were anxiously busy, even as they talked of the doomed Jew and his brief hour of glory, with the many embroidered articles to be worn beneath the royal robe of violet and white, which already lay in order on a long divan.

The low hum of voices ceased instantly as the princess entered from her bath in an adjoining chamber; for it was well understood among her attendants that Amytis would not listen to the tales circulated from lip to lip in the palace. She was ever a kind mistress, but imperious and determined withal, as became a daughter of the Achæmenian line, whose head and founder was the great Cyrus, long since dead and buried in a stately tomb of marble at Pasargadæ.

On this day of all others when a maid, be she royal or baseborn, should smile and be glad, Amytis appeared pale and languid as she gave herself into the hands of her women to be made yet more beautiful. And one of her maids observing this ventured to suggest the merest touch of the fragrant rose color compounded for royal lips and cheeks and enclosed in one of the golden jars upon the toilet table.

"I am too pallid, say you?" Amytis demanded, leaning forward to gaze at herself in the wide expanse of her silver mirror. "Nay; I care not; and were I colorless as the dead, I should not allow you to paint me. I despise the practice, and shall not permit it in my court."

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“The honorable Prince of Ecbatana cannot but find you fair in whatever guise you choose to appear,” said the tire-woman, anxious to please.

The princess drew her pretty brows together in a decided frown. She had already seen the Prince of Ecbatana, and had taken a violent dislike to both his person and manner.

“Where is Dinora?” she asked sharply. “I do not see her here.”

The maids looked at one another in dismay. Then one of them spoke.

“Dinora is, as the gracious princess knows, a Hebrew?”

“Yes; I know it. What then? I wish her attendance at once.”

“The gracious princess knows of the excellent edict of the king regarding the Hebrews?”

“It is not an excellent edict. It is a wicked, outrageous edict, and I have already told my father so; but what has the edict to do with my poor Dinora? I shall hide her in my own chamber when the day of doom comes. I have promised her that no one shall harm so much as a hair of her head.”

Her women exchanged significant glances behind her back; they thought they knew the reason for this promise. Then one shook her head and sighed.

“Dinora ventured to absent herself from the service of the princess this morning because she hoped to do something for her people. She thinks of nothing else by day; dreams of nothing else by night?”

“What can she do—poor slave?” murmured Amytis compassionately. “Even I, should I entreat my father for the Hebrews, could not undo the edict, which is of the laws of the Medes and Persians and cannot be unsaid. But I shall save alive whom I will. I, the daughter of Xerxes, have said it!”

The princess was silent for a space, submitting to her

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coiffeuse, while she braided and curled the rich masses of silken hair under her skillful hands.

"Dinora has gone forth to supplicate the king-for-an-hour, who will this morning be crowned and sceptered in Shushan," ventured one of the women respectfully.

"What wild thing are you saying?" demanded the princess sharply. "Is my father ill, or demented, like the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar?"

"The Great King—may he live forever—is neither ill, nor have the gods afflicted him; but it is said that because the Hebrew Matacas saved his life from the conspirators, who are long since dead and devoured by vultures, as is good for malefactors; and because the reward of Matacas was late in coming, he now rides upon the king's horse, and wears the king's crown, and for one hour carries the king's scepter. More than this, he will ride through the city to be supplicated by whoever will; and for this has Dinora gone forth to seek mercy for the Hebrews of a Hebrew, who for one hour is king and lord of nations."

Amytis listened to this singular explanation of the absence of her favorite maid in silence. Then she waved aside her tire-women, who would have put on her the silken robe of state, in which it was supposed she would presently be given by her father in marriage to the Median prince.

"I must think," she said.

After a little she questioned the women further of the matter, asking through what streets the procession would pass; and if it were true beyond a peradventure that to Matacas the king had entrusted all his powers for even so brief a space.

The maids declared that it was so; and that even at that hour preparations were going forward to carry out the king's orders. One had seen the chiefs of the royal wardrobe going forth from the palace, followed by slaves bearing the sacred garments of the king; another averred that Haman

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had already gone to the Jew's house, and a third protested that she knew where Matacas dwelt; and that, moreover, all the city was agog to see the strange sight of a Hebrew wearing the king's crown and riding openly through the principal streets, and so to the palace, where Xerxes would himself view the procession from the Northern Portico. A fourth added that Matacas would doubtless be further distinguished, since a man who had thus worn the purple could not in future be an obscure person.

"Bring me," ordered Amytis, "a plain robe of white, such as I wear in my garden, when I work among the flowers. Fetch also a veil of a dark blue color, like the veils worn by maids of humble station."

"But may I remind the gracious princess that the Prince of Ecbatana will be waiting?" ventured one of the older women, who held a quasi-authority over the princess, since she had been her nurse from babyhood.

"Let the Prince of Ectabana wait," quoth Amytis, with a tilt of her pretty head.

And now her maids observed that the cheeks and lips of the princess were sweetly tinted with the warm blood beneath, and that with the unbecoming pallor had also vanished her lassitude and unhappy looks.

"Make haste!" cried she, "for I must needs supplicate this new monarch on my own account, since I would ask a boon which my father will not grant me."

Her women obeyed with eager good will; for they loved the princess, and her tears and the sad droop of her once gay and buoyant figure had irked them sorely. They fetched the plain dress of white, and the coarse veil of blue worn by the maids in the great city below. And presently, followed by one small maiden, also close wrapped in the coarse mantle of the common people, the daughter of Xerxes fared forth to the great terrace of the palace; and being quite unobserved among the multitudes of hurrying figures, the

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two maids presently made their way unchallenged down the great staircase, and so into the town.

Never before had Amytis set foot upon the streets of her native city, and at first the sights and sounds terrified her, so that she clung fast to the arm of her maid, her breath coming and going in little gasps of fear and astonishment.

"I could never before imagine what it would be like to be poor, and live in these narrow streets," she murmured, as the two girls were forced to flatten themselves against a wall to avoid the bulging packs on either side of a diminutive donkey, driven by a tall Sagartian, wearing the scarlet loin cloth, striped woolen shirt, and barbaric ornaments of his province. The man shouted roughly to them as he passed, stringing out vulgar oaths in his own tongue, which happily neither maid could understand.

"Presently we shall reach the market," the companion of the princess said encouragingly, "and from thence to the street of the Hebrews it is not far."

In the market was a great, noisy crowd of those that bought and sold, and here the princess recovered some of her adventurous spirits. She kept close, it is true, to her bolder and more experienced guide, but her blue eyes peeping out from under cover of the dark veil took note of the many-hued crowd that jostled her as if she were any low-born maiden of the people. Here, mixed with the hucksters and the townspeople, were to be seen travelers and sightseers from the distant cities of the empire, and soldiers from the lofty fortress adjoining the palace. These were of many nationalities, and the scarlet kilts and gilded breastplates of the handsome Median archers were contrasted with the plain leathern jerkins of the Berbers, or the flowing cotton dress of the natives of central Ind. Here and there, swart Ethiopes from the Upper Nile, their glistening shoulders half covered with leopard or lion skins, made their way amid the babbling crowd, intent upon the piles of melons with

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which the stalls of the vendors were loaded. In the center of the square a space had been cleared for the antics of a couple of Scyths in loose spangled trousers and tall pointed caps, who divided the attention of the gaping onlookers with a Babylonian astrologer, who proclaimed in a loud singsong his willingness to read the stars for the benefit of any who desired to know his destiny, and this for the insignificant sum represented by a silver daric.

On either side were low-arched booths, their façades shielded from the glaring light of the sun by parti-colored cloths stretched over the heads of the crowd. Here were sold the many commodities necessary to the maintenance of existence, many of which the wide-eyed princess had never seen in their natural state. Poultry and game, including wild boars from the forests of the foothills, stags, antelopes, wild partridges, and with them the domesticated fowls, such as chickens, geese, and ducks heaped certain stalls, and overflowed into the neighboring square; while of eggs, vegetables, and fruit there seemed to be no end. On the opposite side of the square were booths whereon were displayed carpets of Babylon and Sardis, rich shawls from Kashmir and Ind, and fine linens, variously dyed, from the looms of Borsippa and Egypt. Here also were coverlets and hangings from Damascus, curiously wrought with many-colored threads of wool; while the muslins of Babylon, many of which were almost as diaphanous as the silken tissues furnished by the same splendid marts, occupied a corner by themselves. All these booths were presided over by Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians or Hebrews, since no Mede or Persian would demean himself by entering into trade either as a buyer or a seller. Shopping and bargaining involved the necessity of falsehood, it was said; hence it was fit only for slaves and barbarians. The labors of the loom, the toil of gold, silver, and coppersmiths, as well as the more general tasks of purveying to the needs of the vast empire, were

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thus given entirely into the hands of foreigners, who waxed fat on the profits of trade.

"We must make haste, dear mistress," whispered the slave girl in the ear of the princess, "there will be a great crowd gathered about the house of the Jew, and no one will show us consideration in such a multitude."

"I am coming, Pactya; but first tell me what the men yonder are selling. See the odd-looking women, quite unveiled, with children clinging to their skirts."

"Those are the Arabian vendors of perfumes, gracious Princess," the maid answered unthinkingly. "You would find on their stalls boxes and vases of alabaster and agate, filled with fragrant salves and cosmetics; they also sell frankincense and nard, with many other spices, precious gums, and perfumes."

Neither mistress nor maid was aware that their conversation was being overheard by a veiled woman who had crowded close behind them in the press, and who now fixed piercing eyes upon the two as they made their way to the street Kashkar, which branched off from the busy market square at right angles. The veiled woman called sharply to a small boy who was playing with a handful of copper rings almost under the feet of the crowd.

"Go," she said sharply, "call Vaj-Niya; tell him to follow me straightway. I have a quarry in view."

Then she, too, melted into the crowd which was steadily streaming into the street called Kashkar, which led toward the river and the southernmost wall of the city.

"If we do not find the Jew, we ought to return at once to the palace, dear mistress," the slave girl was saying, as the strange woman once more jostled them in the ever-increasing throng. "See, the sun is riding high above the houses; it will soon be the hour of noon."

Amytis shuddered slightly. She had been commanded to appear that morning in the great hall of the royal house,

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there to be formally given to the Median prince. From thenceforward she knew that she would be his property, to do with as he liked; assuredly to be taken away to distant Ecbatana under a strong escort of troops, there to be immured in some gilded and cushioned prison, where nothing more interesting than the sipping of sherbets, and the unending processes of the toilet would break the dreary monotony of the days.

"We must find the Jew," she said decidedly. "That is why I came. I always do as I intend. Have you not discovered it?" And she quickened her steps, so that the veiled woman was forced to quicken hers also.

This person presently ventured to touch the princess upon the shoulder.

"Pity the sorrows of a poor woman, who has lost an only daughter, and has not the means to purchase the wax wherewith to preserve her body from contaminating the elements," she whined.

The serving woman in quick alarm would have thrust her strong young body between her mistress and the beggar, who was, her quick eye told her, a woman of the nomadic tribes which haunted the black foothills of the Zagros mountains; but Amytis waved her imperiously aside.

"Be quiet, Pactya," she said, "I wish to question this poor woman," and she pushed aside her veil, the better to look at the suppliant. "Your daughter is dead, you say? Why, then, are you here and not weeping at home? But stay, I will help you. Have you any money, Pactya?"

"There is nothing in my pouch; and do not, I beg of you, tarry to talk to this woman, dear mistress," entreated the girl, more and more alarmed as she saw the bold eyes of the nomad staring greedily at the princess' soft white hands and richly embroidered tunic, which showed beneath the hem of the coarse blue veil.

"I am coming, Pactya; but first let me give the woman

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a bracelet. Take this, and sell it, poor creature, and buy what you will with it."

The woman took the twisted circle of red Egyptian gold and turned it over in her coarse hands.

"This bauble is copper," she said contemptuously, "I can do nothing with it."

Amytis' blue eyes flashed.

"You deserve to be beaten for your bold insolence," she said haughtily. "Come, Pactya."

"Not so fast, my pretty one," sneered the woman. "Your bracelet may be copper; but you, I am confident, are pure gold. You will come with me and comfort me for the loss of my daughter. Come!" and she laid hold of the slim wrist of the princess with a determined hand.

"How dare you touch me?" cried Amytis, trying vainly to wrench herself out of the woman's powerful grasp. "Let me go this instant!"

The serving woman of the princess, half out of her wits with terror, gave vent to a loud scream as she beheld her mistress separated from her in the throng, the veiled woman and an ill-looking man wearing a yellow cap pulling her along, one on either side.

"What's amiss, my bird, that you sing so loud?" asked a voice in her ear.

Pactya looked up wildly and recognized a soldier wearing the gold and scarlet of the king's archers.

"Yonder is the king's daughter, being dragged along by gypsies. There! with the blue veil and white robe. Quick! they will take her away!"

The soldier breathed a great oath, and stood staring incredulously at the girl.

"You are, of course, lying," he said, interrupting the tide of frenzied supplication which Pactya poured out. "The king's daughter could not be here—attended only by you. Nevertheless——"

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He dashed forward, followed by the girl, and presently put his hand upon the man with the yellow cap.

"Here, fellow," he growled. "What are you doing with this—" he stooped to lift Amytis' veil. "By Ormazd! you have gagged the woman!" he exclaimed sharply, and fetched the man with the yellow cap a great buffet over the ear.

Instantly there was a hubbub of confusion, in the midst of which the veiled woman slipped adroitly away like a scared rabbit overlooked by fighting dogs; and Amytis and Pactya, finding themselves also unnoticed, wrapped their veils about their white faces and shrank away out of sight into the dark shadow of an arched gateway.

"What—what shall we do?" panted the slave girl, her tongue thick with fright. "Almost you were lost to me, and I—what must I have done? Anon I should have thrown myself into the river."

"You are a fool, Pactya," said Amytis, stamping her small foot. "You should have given the alarm at once. There are plenty of soldiers about."

"Plenty of soldiers—yes: it was a soldier who saved you. And see, he has punished the man who was dragging you away, and now he is looking around in the crowd for us. Shall I call him? He would take us safely back to the palace. He would not dare do otherwise."

Amytis motioned to the girl to be silent, while she bent forward, her blue eyes alive with determination. "Do you not hear the sound of trumpets?" she said. "Come; it cannot be far, and the procession will be starting from the Jew's house."

And so it was that, just as the cavalcade headed by the king's trumpeters defiled into the street, a maiden wearing a plain robe of white and wrapped in the blue veil worn by the women of Shushan appeared in the road before the slow-stepping Arabian bearing the stately figure of Mordecai,

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robed, crowned, and sceptered with royalty. And the maiden cried out in a loud, clear voice, so that all who heard it stopped without knowing wherefore they obeyed.

"A boon, my lord, who is to-day the Great King. A boon of thy graciousness!"

The tall figure of the erstwhile scribe was observed to stiffen slightly. He slowly extended the scepter, and the girl drew near and touched it, bowing herself low as she did so.

"What wilt thou, woman?" asked the deep voice of the Hebrew. "Speak quickly; for there must be no delay."

"There must needs be delay, when my Lord King rides among his subjects," said the girl, "for there will be many to supplicate his favor. But, listen, I pray you, to my matter; it is but a little one, yet to me my whole life. My father is a soldier and well used to command, and he has ordered me, his maiden daughter, to wed a man of thrice my years. To-day am I to be given to this man, whom I fear and hate, to be borne away to a distant city. I entreat your Majesty's Grace that I be released from this promise of my father's!"

Mordecai looked kindly upon the veiled figure of the girl.

"Maiden," he said, "do you love another than the man whom your father has chosen for you?"

Amytis clasped and unclasped her small hands in an agony of confusion; a tide of passionate color flooded her hidden face.

"I love another," she whispered, "but he is condemned under the law against the Hebrews. Cannot you save him? O King! I entreat your clemency and mercy for that doomed race!"

"And yet, you are not a Hebrew maid," mused the Jew who wore the royal crown. He bent forward to scan the slender figure which knelt upon the stones of the street, her



“AND HAMAN, WITH A FACE OF CLAY, WALKED BEFORE MORDECAI THROUGH THE STREETS OF THE CITY.”

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white slender hands joined high above her head in fervent supplication.

"What may I do in the face of the king's edict?" he muttered, more to himself than to any other. "It is written, and nothing can alter or erase the writing."

Haman, the magnificent, who held the bridle of the king's horse, his face alternately livid and purple with the ebb and flow of humiliation and fury, gave vent to an impatient oath.

"Out of the way, girl!" he said, only he used a vile word to address the kneeling woman; it was a word which cost him dear.

The girl sprang up and threw back her shrouding veil.

"Call you the daughter of the Great King by a foul name?" she cried, and her voice rang out over the crowded place like one of the silver trumpets, which now swung mute from the hands of the king's guards. "Nay, the tongue that hath spoken it shall shortly wither in your mouth, great Haman. Of that, be well assured."

A thousand incredulous eyes were now fixed upon the beautiful face of the bold princess, but of all that stared wondering, Mordecai alone knew certainly that it was the daughter of Xerxes who stood before him; and he trembled beneath the purple to think what might be the bitter consequences of her impulsive act.

"Peace be with thee, maiden," he said slowly. "I grant you the boon of release from a loveless marriage; and let the scribes so write. But I cannot revoke the king's edict concerning the Hebrews. It is already among the laws of the Medes and Persians which cannot be altered."

There was a fresh stir among the dense crowd as a young martial figure, wearing the uniform of a high officer of the king's Immortals pressed forward. Amytis cast an amazed glance at the lofty figure and glittering armor, then she hastily drew the shrouding veil about her face. The Com-

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mander of the Immortals bowed himself and touched the extended scepter of majesty.

“If it seem good to the King’s Majesty, let the king grant that on the thirteenth day of the month Adar, which is the twelfth month, that all the Jews which are in every town and city have the king’s leave to defend themselves against the attack of their enemies, and to put to death whoever ventures to touch them or their goods.”

The voice of the young Prince of Edom trembled slightly as he preferred this bold request; but he stood proudly erect beside the slender figure of the daughter of Xerxes.

A murmur of astonishment passed through the crowd, and every eye fastened expectantly upon the crowned and sceptered Hebrew.

“Jehovah be my witness that I would gladly lay down my life for my people!” groaned Mordecai, and the bystanders saw the great drops that stood out upon his forehead. “But I cannot tamper with the king’s laws, even though mine own life and the lives most dear to me are forfeit. *I must—refuse!*”

A great, incoherent cry arose from the ever-increasing multitude, and many dark Hebrew faces glared at the pseudo-monarch.

“There must needs be delay, when my Lord King rides our trust! He thinks to escape himself, and leave us to perish!” were some of the angry words which reached the ear of Mordecai. But the stern face under the kingly diadem of Persia and Media only grew a shade more pallid.

“Do you, Prince of Edom,” he commanded, “see to it that yonder maid, who but lately entreated a boon at my hands, is safely escorted to the shelter of her father’s house. Do not fail of this, as you hope for the mercy of Jehovah on the day of doom!”

Then he bent his head and spoke to the man who held

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the bridle of his horse. "Let us go on; the time grows short for what we must do."

The chief counselor, whose small, wicked eyes were rolling curiously upon the girl, who had by now drawn back among the crowd, muttered an oath in a strange tongue.

And the procession moved forward, the crowd making way before it sullenly, and closing again after it; as a red wound opens and closes upon the glittering track of a keen knife.

And Haman, with a face of clay upon which was plainly written all evil passions, walked before Mordecai through the streets of the city, proclaiming in a stifled voice the words which he had himself put in the king's mouth:

"Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!"





XXX



HE Prince of Edom, mindful of the command laid upon him by the man whom the king's honor had set for an hour above the heads of the populace, approached the maiden who had been pointed out to him. He had not been present when she had declared herself to be the daughter of Xerxes, and to his careless eye she was a woman of the people, no more.

He spoke to her, therefore, in a tone of gentle authority, as was fitting for a man high in the royal service.

"I am bidden to convey you safe to your father's house, maiden," he said. "And this it would seem I must do at once since other duties press upon me. If you will go before, I will follow, and I give you my word that no harm shall befall you."

Amytis drew aside her veil and looked at him.

"Do you not know me?" she asked in a stifled voice. He bent forward and scanned her features.

"Amytis! Gracious Princess, what do you here?"

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"I came," the princess said proudly, "to ask a boon of the Jew—nay, two tokens of the kingly favor I begged. One he granted me; the other he refused. I shall at least not be forced to wed the Prince of Ecbatana, whom I hate; but I could not save your race, as I had hoped. But I will save you."

"You will save me? Why?"

The prince looked deep into her eyes, and her eyes told him the truth. He trembled and grew pale under all the bronze of foreign suns.

"I am most grateful, daughter of Xerxes," he said slowly, and would have knelt to kiss the border of her mantle in the midst of the deserted street, but she repulsed him with a haughty gesture.

"I am the daughter of Xerxes," she said, after a silence, filled with the silver notes of distant trumpets and the sullen murmur of the departed multitude. "I am the child of many kings; the blood of the great Cyrus beats in my veins and urges me to bold action. It is true, alas, that I may not be a conqueror of provinces, a warrior whose word becomes fateful law, but I would gain for myself happiness. I care for no other crown than the crown of love. And this diadem I crave from one who—I fear—loves me not."

Her head sank upon her breast and a rosy color flooded her pale cheeks, only to fade again as she waited for him to speak.

"Princess," he began slowly, "it is not according to the laws and customs of the court for a man such as I to speak to the king's daughter. And so, I beg——"

"I care not for the laws and customs of the king's court," she interrupted him passionately. "They are altogether vain and false. I will not be bound by them. Nay, to be a base-born slave were better—far better than to be the daughter of Xerxes, if I may not seek happiness."

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He hesitated, his dark eyes averted from her lovely, petitioning face.

"As I am the prince of a doomed race and a soldier of Xerxes, I may not, in honor, speak with you longer," he said at last. "Let me take you at once to the palace."

"You are afraid," she cried scornfully. "You, the Commander of the Immortals?"

"Yes, Princess," he answered steadily. "I am afraid—for you."

Her blue eyes blazed upon him, the eyes of the imperious Achæmenian, inherited through many warrior kings.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"I dare not answer you, daughter of Xerxes."

She turned from him with a heart-broken sigh that was half a sob. "I am ready," she said coldly; "but you must call a litter. I am weary."

He looked about him perplexedly.

"If your gracious Highness would condescend to enter the house of Maticas, which is close at hand, I will at once cause a litter to be fetched from the palace."

She made a listless gesture of assent, and he knocked upon the door. And when presently Abihail cautiously opened the peep-hole in the portal, he explained briefly that a noble lady with her maid would like to rest within while he should go away to summon litters.

The woman hastened to open. And so it came to pass that the daughter of Xerxes rested in the cool shadow of the fig tree, where Esther had fed her doves in the old days. And Nathan, Prince of Edóm, beholding her there, wondered, even while his heart was filled with memories, sweet and bitter, that it should be so.

Abihail brought her guest refreshment in a silver bowl; and she could not refrain herself from foolish boasting in the presence of the Persian lady whose fingers sparkled so with jewels, though her veil and mantle were of coarse

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stuff, and about whose neck hung an engraved gem of price.

“Fear not to drink from the cup, gracious lady,” quoth the old woman, “for I may assure you that the Queen’s Majesty hath oftentimes drunk from it. Ay, and possets of my own making more than once.”

Amytis lifted her heavy eyes to the woman’s face.

“You are babbling, Jewess,” she said haughtily. “How could the queen drink from this cup?—though ’tis a fair enough example of the silversmith’s art. The figures about the rim speak curious stories.”

“The cup is of ancient Hebrew workmanship, noble lady,” Abihail said proudly, “and the legend is that of Boaz and the Moabitess, Ruth—she who left the land of her birth to follow after Naomi, the wife of Elimelech. Ay, the Queen’s Majesty used often to hear the story from my lips, though you might not think it to look at me.”

The daughter of Xerxes was looking hard at the woman now, and her eyes grew suddenly keen and searching. “This is the house of Matacas, the scribe, is it not?”

The woman nodded her head with an air of pride.

“To-day he was king,” she chuckled. “With my own eyes I beheld them set the crown upon his head and the scepter in his hand. Did you see him, noble lady?”

“I saw him—yes: but tell me, did Esther—did the queen ever live in this house?”

“They tell me everyone in the palace knows that she is a Hebrew,” Abihail said, approaching her plump face, creased and puckered with many wrinkles, close to that of the princess. “For my part I am not afraid that anyone should know the truth, especially now that Mordecai hath been so honored of the king. It can mean but one thing, and that is that the Great King—may he live forever—” and Abihail paused to perform a queer genuflexion, which

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caused her ample figure to quiver—"will through him presently set aside that terrible edict."

"And Esther lived here, and drank from this bowl?"

"I have said it, and it is true. For fifteen years I, and I alone, served the queen, as I now serve you."

The face of Amytis grew dark as she glanced about the humble place.

"Did the Prince of Edom come often to this house to see her?" she demanded.

"Who—Nathan? Ah, yes; you may well believe it, madame. He knew and loved her from a child. Many is the time I have seen Hadassah playing about this very courtyard, and Nathan studying the scrolls of the Prophets upon this bench of olive wood where you are sitting. Ay, those were good days! But now they have taken my lamb from me, and I cannot see her even to kiss the hem of her garment. The wife of Haman promised me that much, but when I went yesterday to her house to remind her of her word I was sent away with ignominy."

"The wife of Haman? Did you tell that woman what you have told me?"

"She questioned me; yes. But she declared that already she knew all and more than I could tell her."

"How does the tongue of the fool ever work dire mischief," murmured the princess. Aloud she said severely:

"You deserve to be strangled for babbling of the king's wife, even to me. But you must shortly suffer the penalty of your folly with those whom you have helped to ruin. Here are the litters at last. I shall be glad to go. Come, Pactya."

The Prince of Edom walked with drawn sword behind the litter of Amytis; and once he fancied he heard the sound of a smothered sob from behind the silken curtains.

And so presently the two litters, borne by stout Nubians and guarded by the Commander of the Immortals, ap-

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proached the palace on its western side, and were borne up a staircase little used save for the incoming of the vast supplies daily required to meet the demands of the thousands resident in the royal palaces. Within the hour the princess was set down unharmed in her own house, to be told by her frightened and weeping women that her royal father had thrice sent for her, and that further delay meant undoubted ruin.

“I will go to Xerxes as I am,” declared Amytis; “for I must tell him what I have done.”





XXXI



MATHISTAN, Prince of Ecbatana, was a man who had been seldom denied or contradicted during the course of a life whose exact duration was known only to the scribes who kept the births and deaths of titled personages. He had figured in many wars and had won distinction in none, yet because he was the hereditary Prince of Ecbatana, descended from Astyages, King of Media, he had ventured to demand the hand of Amytis, daughter of Xerxes; and he had come with all haste at the king's bidding to claim his bride. The alliance, he conceived, might serve to strengthen his pretensions to the throne of Media and Persia, should the eagerly sought opportunity of overthrowing the usurping Achæmenian dynasty arise.

In person Mathistan was short and stout, and his broad, swart face, half covered by a perfumed and ringleted beard, which yet failed to hide a weak and sensual mouth, his thick neck, and the small fierce eyes which rolled dully under bushy brows did not commend him to the favor of fair

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women. This circumstance, however, had not up to the present time been of the least moment to the prince. To behold a woman, to languidly desire her, and to place her in that portion of his well-guarded palace devoted to his wives, had been the easy programme hitherto practiced by this Median despot. For the reception of Amytis he had prepared somewhat more carefully. The daughter of Xerxes was to be the princess paramount, before whom all lesser favorites must bow the knee. He had therefore caused certain apartments to be lavishly beautified with gilding and semi-precious marbles, and he had brought with him a chest of jewels, inherited from the ancient Median kings, which he intended to bestow upon the princess, once she was his.

He had already held audience with his bride elect—once, twice; on each occasion the interview taking place in the presence of the king. And though the princess had looked coldly enough upon her royal suitor, he was conscious of an agreeable sentiment of admiration for the beautiful young girl, which he felt might shortly warm into a genuine passion. On the day set for his espousals he had presented himself with his suite at the royal house, for the purpose of participating in the preliminary ceremonies, which always prefaced a royal marriage.

The great pillared Hall of Audience with its vast sculptured portico was crowded with titled personages and lesser courtiers when the magnificent figure of Mathistan, surrounded by his retinue of Median nobles, appeared.

The Prince of Ecbatana was seen to be garbed in the stately robes of ceremony formerly used by the Median kings, and still affected by all loyal adherents of the ancient Susianian dynasty, which in secret every Median subject of the Achæmenian crown hoped might yet be reëstablished. His slow stride scarce disturbed the clusters of perpendicular folds and the formal festoons of his robe, fashioned of a rich yet semi-transparent silken stuff, in color a deep purplish

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crimson suggesting the purple of reigning royalty. Beneath this distinctively Median garment, far-famed in the annals of historians, and slavishly copied by kings and potentates of every age, showed closely fitted garments of embroidered linen stiff with pearls and thread of gold. The Median had chosen to supplement his rather insignificant stature with heeled shoes of gilded leather, an innovation lately introduced from Egypt, and upon his head towered a lofty Kitaris of stiffened linen, jeweled and cinctured with bands of turquoise and pearl, which boldly suggested the spotted fillet of blue and white, sacred to the Achæmænian monarch alone. Beneath this headdress of arrogant suggestion, the Ecbatanean prince wore an ample wig of reddish hair which jutted out behind in a baglike mass of close, flattened ringlets. It was further observed by the curious who had assembled from every part of the palace that the aspirant to the hand of the royal Amytis must have spent many hours in the hands of his "adorners," for his swart skin plainly showed the lavish application of cosmetics, while his brows and lashes had been as skillfully treated with the famous Babylonian dyes in order to increase the size and brilliancy of his eyes. For the rest, he was loaded with chains, collars, and bracelets of wrought gold; a short jeweled sword, scarce larger than a dagger, hung from the broad cincture of gold about his middle, and great hoops of gold depended from the thick lobes of his ears and hung far down on the close curled beard. As this barbarically splendid figure strutted slowly along, it exhaled the mingled perfumes of precious nard and the costlier unguents of Egypt.

Within the chamber of audience, with its many-colored pavement of precious marbles, its light wooden pillars plated with gold, and its brilliantly colored sculptures and draperies, were gathered such persons as had been formerly commanded to be present, all magnificently garbed, all hushed—expectant. It was said that the king and queen would pres-

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ently emerge from the curtained doorway to the left of the dais, and take their seats upon the elevated thrones under the canopy of gold and purple. The Princess Amytis, escorted by noble maidens, would then emerge from the door to the right, and pass in front of the dais, where she would be met by the bridegroom. The two would pass out from the Hall of Audience to be met at the door by a procession of white-robed Zoroastrian priests and a hundred noble children bearing garlands of roses and myrtle boughs, and all would repair to the altar of sacred fire, upon the steps of which two white horses would be sacrificed to Ahura-Mazda and Armaati, the goddess of fertility, whose united blessing could alone give peace and the assurance of wedded felicity. The hour set for the stately ceremonial was that when Mithra, ascending the heavens, pauses halfway to shed beams of full morning into all dark places of the earth. No other hour was deemed more auspicious, and both day and hour had been carefully chosen with reference to the stars governing the nativities of the high contracting parties.

When the auspicious hour finally arrived, waxed, then waned, and still the king did not appear, the hush of the expectant guests was broken by whispered conjecture and buzzing inquiries. It was rumored that the king was ill or dead; and when this was promptly disproved, it became known in the mysterious fashion in which winged rumor flies, swift as light from mind to mind, that the princess had disappeared. The king's eunuchs despatched to her apartments reported that she had left the palace in the early morning attended by a single woman-in-waiting; and no one, least of all her distracted attendants, knew whither she had gone. The king was declared to have fallen into a transport of mingled rage and anxiety, and the expectant bridegroom, who had also disappeared from public view, threatened dire revenge, it was whispered, for the

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insult put upon him and the powerful half of the kingdom which he represented. A herald in blue and silver presently commanded the spectators to disperse, in the name of the king. And this they finally did, amid much vain conjecture as to what was passing behind the curtained doorways of the royal house.

When Amytis, still appareled in the coarse blue veil and mantle she had worn in her bold descent into the city, appeared before her royal father, his attendants trembled lest he should straightway strike her dead with his own hand.

But the girl approached fearlessly, apparently quite unterrified by the stern looks of the king.

"I am somewhat late, it would appear," she observed calmly, as she met the fierce question in his eyes.

"Late?" echoed the king. "What mean you, girl?"

The princess made a disdainful gesture toward the crowd of curious persons who surrounded the monarch.

"Send them away," she said coldly. "What I have to say, I will say to you alone, my father."

"On the contrary, Princess, you will say before them what you have to say to me. Do you know what you have done?"

"I know—yes, and I care not what the penalty may be. I am even willing to die."

There was a mournful cadence in the girl's voice, a desperate sadness in her eyes which pierced the cloud of the king's displeasure and reached the father's heart beneath. He waved his hand impatiently in token that his attendants withdraw themselves from his person.

"Now, tell me, my child, why did you not come at my bidding at the hour and in the manner specified?"

"Because," she burst out, "I could not wed the Prince of Ecbatana. I hate and loathe him. My flesh shudders and cries out at the touch of his hand, the glance of his eye. And to be his wife—nay, I could not."

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The king frowned. "But I had commanded it. You have forgotten, it seems, what it cost your mother to disobey me."

"You did not love my mother," the girl said in a tone of sad conviction. "If you had loved her, no one could have persuaded you to punish her as you did."

"Insolent girl! You shall suffer for this. But explain your absence from the palace in the face of my express command."

"I went down into the city, and craved release from this hateful marriage with Mathistan from the Hebrew, Matacas, who to-day wears your robe and bears the scepter of your power."

"*From Matacas!*"

"From no other, since he and he alone could help me. My marriage to the Median was not yet a decree, and this I knew. It has now become impossible, since I have obtained the word of Matacas that it shall not take place."

The king smote his knee with his broad palm in a sudden gust of anger.

"What other act of mine did the bold Jew venture to contravene?" he demanded.

"No other," the princess told him. "I knelt before him in the dust of the streets, and begged the lives of the Jews from him; but he refused."

"Refused? *Matacas refused?* I had hoped that he might do something to save himself and his people."

"You might well hope for this, my father; for in that sweeping edict of destruction is involved your own wife and queen, Esther."

Xerxes stared at his daughter, while his bronzed face slowly paled.

"She—is—" he gasped.

Amytis bowed her head. "The queen is a Hebrew," she told him, "and of close kin to Matacas. To-day I

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saw her house, and even drank milk from her cup, at the hands of an ancient serving woman with an indiscreet tongue, which Matacas would have done well to remove, since by means of it Haman learned the truth many moons ago."

The king's eyes were terrible to see.

"Again I have been tricked and dishonored," he groaned, "and that by a man I trusted above all others. Is there no one true, no one whose heart is not utterly false and corrupt?"

"Yes," his daughter told him, a proud light leaping to her eyes and a brave color to her cheeks, as when a flag is suddenly unfurled, "there are two such men in your kingdom. This day I have proved them."

"Who are they?"

"The two men who refused to take what was offered them by the daughter of the great king—Matacas and Nathan, Prince of Edom. Matacas rejected life, honor, and happiness, when he refused to tamper with the king's laws. The Prince of Edom sacrificed more: for he refused *me*, when I would have given myself to him utterly!"





XXXII



HAT same day, while yet the king held converse with his maiden daughter, the chief counselor, Haman, having completed the hateful task given him to perform by his master, went to his own house. He went ashamed and humiliated, for his ears yet rang with the gibes of the multitude, many of whom had beheld the building of the lofty gibbet in the square before his house. And as he went he gnawed his bitten lips with curses.

The Princess Zarara met him on the portico of the palace, her dark eyes alive with terrified questionings.

He gnashed upon her with his teeth like some savage animal.

“Why did you advise me to go to the king last night,” he cried violently. “But for you, I might have slain Matacas by stealth, as he passed through the streets. A sword-thrust in the dark, and the swine would have troubled me no more!”

“Did not Matacas seek revenge upon you, while yet he

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held the scepter? I—I feared lest you might not return alive.”

Haman stared at the woman, his heavy jaws agape. For an instant the thought of his enemy's rare generosity and the lofty magnanimity of his conduct struggled with the black hatred which had come to possess his whole nature. Then he laughed contemptuously.

“He durst not lay hands upon me, the king's favorite,” quoth he, with an oath. “I could have strangled him with these naked hands.”

Zarara clung to him in a sudden passion of foreboding.

“You might better have fallen upon your knees before the Jew and entreated his forbearance,” she murmured. “But now, alas! I fear it is too late.”

“Too late? Ay, too late to see the Jew's foul body dangle from our tree of death to-day, my beauty; but not too late for my revenge! You shall see. This day I am again invited to banquet with the great king and with Queen Esther. And look you, woman; I have thought much concerning this strange action of the queen's. ‘Why,’ I asked myself, ‘does she come, at very risk of her life, to crave my presence at a banquet?’ Why? The answer is clear as the noonday beams of Mithra; the woman fears me, the great Haman. She would fain beg her life at my hands when the day comes, the day of my wrath, when a crimson death shall work my pleasure on the Jews. Shall I save her, this bold Hebrew woman who has dared to steal the crown? What say you, my Zarara?”

But Zarara appeared half paralyzed with some unknown and as yet unseen terror.

“I—I dreamed a dream this day,” she faltered with stiffened lips. “A frightful dream of woe. And I am afraid.”

“A dream, a wild, foolish dream? Nay, all our dreams are but shadows.”

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“Shadows—yes; but shadows of something vast, terrible, which looms unseen in the near future. Listen! I dreamed of our gibbet yonder, the tree of death which towers fifty cubits into the air. Know you that it looks in at the windows of the chamber where sleep our sons?”

“Nay; I thought nothing of it. But it matters not. So will I teach my sons how to avenge insult and contumely. The lion’s cubs must ever learn to devour the lion’s prey. But what of your dream, woman?”

“I saw it—our terrible tree—laden with the fruit of death. High was it; so high that the bulging eyes of the dying man looked into mine, as I stood with my sons upon the roof of our palace. But the face was—great Ormazd forbid—the face was your own!”

“Faugh! You disgust me with your insane vapping, woman. Already I have suffered enough in the rage which consumed me as I toiled on foot through the dust of the streets. Is there no wine with which to quench my thirst?”

“The wine is here, my lord.”

Haman raised the cup to his lips; then dashed it to the earth.

“This is no wine!” he howled. “It is blood, and you have given it to me to drink! Blood—and I cannot drink it!”

The contents of the fallen cup splashed upon the white robe of Zarara; and she stood, stiffened with stark terror, staring at the spreading crimson.

“It is an omen!” she whispered with dry lips. “Be warned and fly while there is yet time! For so will the blood of the Jews be snatched from your thirsting lips and fall upon me—upon me!”

The words ended in a long, quavering shriek, and the woman tottered and fell, a huddled shape at his feet.

Haman stared at her dully for an instant.

“She is but a weak fool, after all,” he muttered, as he

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stirred the limp body with his foot, "and no fit mate for one whom the fates have chosen for lofty distinction. I will yet take the queen in the palace yonder to wife."

He called Zarara's women presently, and they bore her away to her chamber, where she lay silently awaiting the slow approach of the event whose icy shadow already lay heavy upon her.

Once only she spoke to the women.

"Where," she asked, "is my husband?"

"He has gone forth," they told her, "to banquet with the queen and the King's Majesty."

"Did he first ask how I fared?"

And her women answered with many smooth and lying words that the great Haman had sent one of his servants to ask after the health of the princess, and that he was rejoiced to learn of her recovery from the swoon which had so suddenly afflicted her.

She resolutely closed eyes and lips after that, and lay like one tormented by unseen fires, while the fateful hours passed, minute by minute.





XXXIII



ESTHER, the queen, was alone in the small chamber which she had chosen for her morning and evening devotions. The room was built entirely of white marble, and nothing marred the flowerlike purity of walls or floor; toward the east a single wide window opened outward, and since the queen's house stood near the verge of the lofty platform upon which the many palaces were built, this window showed nothing to the kneeling woman within save a wide expanse of sky, and the dim horizon, where serrated peaks of purple arose to meet the softer tints of the bending heavens.

Esther had learned to love the broad expanse of sky, where in the late autumn months occasional swift showers hurried past to be dissipated again in the warm sunlight, which appeared to her like the smile of God as it rested upon the lowly earth.

The queen spent many hours alone in this quiet room, for here she could think the deep, still thoughts which

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calmed and soothed her, and kept her from the fret of the feverish life which beat just outside the door. To-day she knelt longer than her wont by the open window, her lips moving in timid petitions for a strength and courage which she knew she must have in the hours to come. On this day the king and Haman would again come to the banquet which slaves were preparing in the pavilion of the garden.

She had bidden her tire-women make her beautiful; for even her beauty, she knew, must tell to-day in the struggle for a nation's life. They had clothed the queen all in white, above which a robe of transparent cloth of gold from the looms of Babylon fell like pale sunshine. About her brows was bound a band of dull gold, and from beneath it fell the rich masses of her hair starred here and there with pearls. About her throat, and hanging far down upon the whiteness of her robe, ropes and clusters of the rare pink pearls of Sidon gleamed like sun-kissed snow upon distant Lauristan. She was indeed very beautiful in her queenly robes, and she humbly thanked Jehovah for her beauty, and for the returning happiness which she scarce dared to clasp too close, lest it again elude her grasp. The king himself had sent her the rose-colored pearls that morning, and she raised the strands to her lips, as she besought Jehovah to purify her utterly from all false and unworthy thoughts, and to give to her peace and courage wherewith to speak to her husband of all that was in her heart.

The queen arose from her devotions after a space, and with one last, lingering look at the wide plains, the wider sky, and the purple peaks at the far horizon's rim, passed out into the garden, where she spent many hours each day, and where the summer yet lingered in rose-embowered walks and liliated pools. Before long, she knew, the court would journey to the south, where the winter would be passed in the softer climate of Babylon. Meanwhile, the terrible twelfth month was steadily approaching along its long avenue

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of days. It would loom close; it would dawn at last in all its terror! How could the crushing blow of the edict be avoided? How were the carnage and ruin to be hindered? The king might indeed protect her from the swords of the assassins; she would also ask for Mordecai and Nathan. But her heart, so lately strengthened and calmed by devotion, again failed her as she thought that Xerxes might well be angry with her for the long deception which had been practiced upon him.

She bent over a half-opened rose to inhale its fragrance, scarce knowing what she did.

"If only I might have told him at the first," she was thinking, and the white rose was not whiter than her cheek.

She became aware presently of the approach of a slight, girlish figure veiled in blue. It was not one of her own women, she knew; and a slight feeling of anger caused her to draw her black brows together, as she stood at her full height, watching the girl step boldly across the flower beds, treading down more than one choice exotic in her haste.

"You did not know me," said the girl, casting aside her veil; "but I must tell you at once what nearly concerns you."

Esther held out her hand without speaking, and Amytis perceived that she trembled violently.

"You are frightened, Queen; and I cannot find it in my heart to pity you overmuch. Why did you deceive my father into thinking you a princess of Babylon, when you were of the Hebrew race? Did you not know that he despises a liar above all base persons?"

The queen's beautiful head hung to one side like a flower whose stalk has been rudely broken.

"I—I did not willingly deceive the king," she whispered. "I would have told him all, but I was forbidden."

Amytis's blue eyes flashed scorn upon the queen.

"Forbidden—nay, who should forbid the wife of Xerxes

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anything? You are no queen of Persia and Media if anyone save the king may dictate speech or silence."

Esther was silent for a space; then she lifted her head proudly.

"You have spoken the truth, Princess," she said quietly, "and right bitterly have I repented my obedience. I should have disobeyed Mordecai."

"Of what kin is the scribe to you?" demanded Amytis, staring hard at the lovely figure of woe which the queen in her rich robes and flashing jewels presented.

"He is the son of my father's brother," Esther made answer, and again she hung her head, and her eyes filled with slow-gathering tears. "He took me a feeble babe, from the arms of my dying mother, and always he has loved me and protected me even as a father. I loved him as a daughter, and as a daughter I gave him my obedience."

"And he forbade you to speak to the king of your parentage? But I cannot understand. Are you the child of a slave, or baseborn, that he should do this thing?"

The queen drew her slight figure to its full height as she cast a look full of displeasure at the girl.

"I am of the royal line," she said proudly, "descended from the kings of Judah."

"Why did not Mordecai so represent you?"

"We were Hebrews; and he feared the king."

Amytis stamped her small foot upon the ground. "That is always the way," she said. "Everyone fears and cringes before my father. Yet only the coward, the liar, the cheat, need tremble in his presence. He is truth itself, and more merciful than most kings, even in his wrath. But I may not tarry. I came here to tell you that the king already knows all."

"The king—knows?"

"I myself informed him that you are of the Hebrew race. Haman, as everyone is aware, hates and despises Matabas;

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but I suspect that his poisoned dart was aimed higher and by another hand. But of that I may not speak; only when the king and Haman come to your banquet to-day, do not whine and cry and beg for your life like a scourged slave. But demand it boldly, and do not be afraid to denounce Haman to the king."

Esther's dark eyes were fixed upon the imperious face of the princess. She fancied she could read there the loved lineaments of the girl's father.

"But the king will be very angry with me," she said simply.

"No; he will not. He will understand, even though I cannot. And he will forgive you for all your foolish deceit and for your fear of him. I think I should divorce you and marry a warrior-queen, were I Xerxes; but he has a strange liking for weak, silly women like you."

The rude words of the princess appeared to act like a tonic upon the despondent queen. She took a sudden step toward the bold speaker with an angry exclamation.

"How dare you address me in that manner?" she demanded. "You forget that I am the queen!"

Amytis burst into a tinkling laugh.

"Nay, it was you who had forgotten, gracious Majesty, and I wished to bring your royal estate more clearly to your mind. You are the queen. Act the queen, and tear your insolent enemies from their high places. And hark you, Haman will weep and howl and grovel before you, for he is a coward and no man. Of this I warn you; do not show him any mercy, for he would to-day have hung Matacas upon a gallows to be the derision of the city. You did not know it? Well, you should have known it. Your slaves and women knew it—every one. A great queen may not hide herself in a closed garden like a sucking dove. She must have eyes and ears everywhere, as does my grandmother, Queen Atossa."

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"Nay, I will not soil my mind with all that eyes and ears may see and hear in the palace," Esther said proudly. "Jehovah will protect me from my enemies. I trust in him!"

The princess shrugged her slim shoulders.

"I also am a believer in the All-Wise," she said crisply. "But there are serpents as well as doves in the world, and perchance we are expected to emulate both. Be innocent; but be wise also. Pray to your Jehovah all that you will; but command trusted servants of yours to observe what your enemies are doing while you pray."

Esther shook her head.

"Nay, I do not wish to know if I have enemies," she said, and again her tone of childlike simplicity and candor caused the princess to stare in amused astonishment.

Amytis breathed a laugh which was yet half a sigh.

"You are a strange woman," she said at last. "Sometimes I think you are more simple and foolish than a little child; and again I doubt if you are not wiser than the wisest sage. Perchance 'tis your mingled innocence and wisdom that charms the king. Nevertheless, remember what I have told you. Be fearless, truthful, merciless!"

With this parting word of advice, the princess wrapped her veil about her as if to depart.

"Farewell, Queen," she said, "and may the gods of Persia as well as those of your own land be kind to you."

Then she suddenly approached her face quite close to that of the queen.

"Tell me truly," she said, and her blue eyes brimmed with hot tears; "do you love Nathan? Do not be afraid to tell me the truth. I must—must know it!"

Esther gazed at the girl in astonishment.

"I do not understand," she stammered. "Once before you questioned me of this matter, and I told you I had known the Prince of Edom in my youth."

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“But to-day, Queen, I was in the house of Matacas, and the woman there told me that he loved you. And I, most miserable of women, love him, and because I love him I could kill you for being so beautiful. *I hate you!*”

Esther reached out and drew the girl into her arms.

“Nay, do not hate me because you love him,” she said tenderly. “You must the rather love me because I am even as his sister, the daughter of his mother. He is a brave and good man, and guileless of all evil. Love him purely, and he will love you.”

And the princess, willing to be comforted, rested her bright head upon the breast of the queen, and sobbed out all her heart there.

“If it be possible,” she entreated, “speak to the king of me; for verily I would choose to die with the Hebrew Prince on the thirteenth day of Adar, rather than be wed to any other.”

And this word of the daughter of Xerxes was destined to be remembered, for in it was a wild prophecy of things yet to be.

While the women yet talked together, there came a eunuch to tell the queen that the honorable Prince Haman was already arrived and craved immediate speech with the Queen’s Majesty.

“I will not receive the man,” said Esther, “for the hour is not yet, and the king tarries.”

“Nay, go,” Amytis bade her. “Let the man speak what is in his mind. But do you betray nothing of all that I have told you. So you will be able the more completely to overthrow him when the moment appointed of the gods is come.”

So Queen Esther received Haman, the Prince of Agag, in her house; and the magnificent one, observing traces of tears in her beautiful eyes, felt wickedly sure of his prey; yet, as an eagle hovers high in air, staring hungrily at its

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quarry, so did Haman gloat over the beauty of the queen and over her utter helplessness, also. He would indeed save the life of this queen, for she was unlike any other woman in the world in her loveliness. And he would carry her away to a certain wild fortress in the mountains where she would be his to do with as he liked.

Esther shrank under his evil gaze, for in all her purity she felt his vileness, and as an angel turns away, sickened by the foul emanations of the polluted soul it would fain save, she averted her eyes, murmuring vague words of greeting.

"I had thought," she said, "that Haman would come in the train of the king."

"Not so, most beautiful of all queens, I came purposely before the hour, that I might speak with you of that which has caused tears to flow from your lovely eyes."

Esther's queenly figure seemed to grow taller, as she looked at the man.

"You are overbold in your speech, Prince," she said coldly.

"Nay, sweet Queen; I am at once the boldest and the humblest of those who serve you. But serve you I would with my life."

"If it is for such empty words as these you craved private audience with me," said Esther, her tones plainly revealing her growing displeasure, "I may tell you that the fealty of subjects is nothing less than my right as the queen consort of Xerxes."

Haman leered his admiration of her, as he bowed his great, glittering bulk almost to the ground.

"You are as unflinching in the face of desperate odds as you are beautiful, O Queen," quoth he; "and by the nine attributes of Ormazd, I but love you the better for it!"

Esther grew pale to the lips at this insolent declaration.

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"I see you are afraid of me, beautiful Hebrew," muttered Haman, with an evil smile. "And well you may be, woman, for even now the sword is at your breast. But I am all powerful, and I hold your life in my hand to give or to withhold. I will give it you for one small mark of your royal favor. Will you take it from me, Queen, at my price?"

Esther forced her stiffened lips to make reply.

"What is the price you would ask of me in exchange for my life?" she asked, her eyes blazing strange, fearsome lightnings upon the man as he bowed and grimaced before her.

He put out his great hand as if to seize her; but she eluded him with a lithe movement of her slim body.

"Hah! I see that you do not yet understand me, lovely Queen. But you are aware of the edict of Xerxes concerning the Hebrews?"

Esther's mute lips formed the words of assent.

"And you dare not deny to me that you are a Hebrew. Nay, Queen, I have all the proofs. You are of close kin to the swine, Matabas, who will to-morrow hang dead in chains before my palace. You also are mine, and you cannot escape except as I open before you the door of deliverance. You are hoping that the king will save you. But he will not. He cannot. He is bound hand and foot with the iron of his own law. Did he save his former queen, Amestris, from the decree of divorce which he made in his cups? You know the event which made you queen in her stead. Even so will another wear your crown and your robes of state. Beautiful women are not hard to come by. Xerxes has but to speak the word, and they flock to his call like doves from every part of his vast dominions."

"Leave me, base creature!" gasped Esther. "I will not listen to you further."

"Not so, sweet Queen, I must say all now that the

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hour is propitious. And be calm, I entreat you; the king does not know that you are a Hebrew. I have purposely kept the truth from him. And I will keep it, even to the day when there shall be a sword for every Hebrew breast—your own, also. The word has gone forth; and no one can save you, if I save you not. But hark you, I will preserve you because you are beautiful and because I desire you. I have an estate in the far Zagros mountains, where you shall dwell in such luxury as even a queen may envy. When the day arrives, I will bribe your eunuchs to deliver a veiled and gagged slave clad in your royal robes to the swords of the executioners; but you shall escape in a way which I shall provide.”

Esther's dark eyes had become consuming fires of wrath.

“Stop!” she cried. “I spurn your vile offers! Sooner would I die a thousand deaths of torture than to accept the life of my poor body upon such terms. Go; you pollute my ears!”

Haman laughed aloud; a dreadful sound, it smote upon the shuddering ears of the pallid queen.

“I am bidden to banquet with the king this day; and I shall banquet with the king,” he said loudly. “And I will even forgive you, my Esther, for your unthinking words. Nay, you are but the more beautiful in your anger. I am well accustomed to the ways of women, and I fear not the lightning of your eyes nor the sting of your words. You will think of what I have said to you, as the dreadful days creep on, and you will send me word. One word will secure to you life, safety, and such happiness as I alone can give you. Come, sweet Queen, you are not angry with me?”

“Hist!” she murmured; “hear you not the sound of many feet? The king is at hand!”

Haman stared in angry astonishment; of a sudden the queen's face had become suffused with a glorious rose; her

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eyes softened and grew even more large and beautiful; her whole figure appeared to dilate, so that she seemed some lovely being from another world, whose light feet touch not the sordid earth, but float above it.

“The king,” she repeated, “is at hand!”





XXXIV



ERXES entered the queen's audience chamber with all the pomp and circumstance befitting the greatest of monarchs; his eyes—the imperious blue eyes of the conquering Cyrus, handed down to this ruler of a decadent empire, with the frank impetuous nature which scorned deceit—searching for his wife.

She came forward to meet him in the splendor of her young beauty, and bowed before him, till he put forth his hand to raise her.

“Nay, not even to me must the queen of the world abase her proud head. My Esther, I salute you!”

He stooped and pressed his lips to her white fingers.

“Ha! Haman; what do you here before me? Or do I mistake in thinking myself the guest of honor at this feast?”

He glanced at his queen with a questioning look.

“The great Haman,” said Esther, with a strange smile,

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“came with the intent of proffering me a valuable gift. But I could not accept it.”

“A gift? Haman dared offer the Queen of Persia a gift? And what, I ask you, counselor, have you to offer that I may not give my queen? Know you not that to no man save Xerxes may his queen and wife be debtor?”

Haman's small eyes rolled wickedly upon the queen as he made meaning answer.

“Yet I offered her Majesty a fair gift, and one which even the king cannot duplicate. If the queen elects to spurn it and the giver, I can but grieve as I bow to her decree.”

“Ay, perhaps you must needs grieve, my Haman. We will hear more of your matter when we have dined.”

And so presently all three were reclined upon the ivory couches with feet of gold, which had been provided in the queen's house when first Xerxes had lavished upon it all his royal generosity. And before them was spread the table, whereon a noiseless train of servants presently set the viands in due order. Behind the king stood his “taster,” whose duty it was to eat first of every dish, lest poison lurk in the food; and beside the taster stood the cup bearer, all in gold and purple; and behind these two high officials—both Median nobles of high rank—the bearer of the royal fan stirred the languid air to a soft breeze with skillful motions of his huge disk-shaped implement, made of the dark plumage of the eagle, and used only for the king. The queen was similarly attended; and behind the place of Haman, also, stood persons of distinction, ready to wait upon his appetite or his thirst.

The arrogant heart of the chief counselor was stirred with fresh ambitions and lustful desires as he looked about on the magnificent scene. The room in which the banquet was served was not the same as on the previous day, he observed, and wondered idly why this should be. There was a curtained doorway on the right, and on the left the

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space between the slender columns of precious marbles was draped softly with hangings of Babylonian tapestries wrought with lotus flowers in a dim tracery of gold, between bands of blue. The walls were faced with alternate slabs of jade and agate, waist high, to where a frieze of richly colored sculptures represented the king in a triumphal procession; the king at a feast; the king offering sacrifices before one of the seven great shrines of the sacred fire; the king receiving a deputation of foreign satraps—always and everywhere the king. The heart of Haman waxed merry as he thought how he would shortly erase that proud image from the mind of the beautiful woman who reclined so near him that he could inhale the faint, delicious perfume of her hair, as the cool breeze of the fans swept it. Between the half-drawn draperies one could catch glimpses of the marble colonnade without, and beyond, brilliant vistas of the garden, still glowing with flowers and sparkling with the fountains the queen loved.

Steadily the tide of gold, silver, and crystal dishes flowed in and out, as noiseless slaves attended the table. Now garlands of small fragrant roses were brought and placed about the brows of the diners, and crowning the flagons of rare vintages cooled with snow; and anon there stole in between the parted curtains the sound of stringed instruments and the singing of melodious voices of girls.

The king looked about him well pleased.

“You play the royal hostess right graciously, my Esther,” he said. “There is nothing lacking to complete our content. What say you, great Haman, is not the queen affording us a banquet fit for the gods themselves?”

Haman, who was gorging himself with a dish of venison prepared in a way new to his palate, answered thickly:

“The king is, as ever, divinely right. The queen’s gracious majesty has outdone the banquet of yesterday, a feat which I should have declared impossible at the time. But

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I perceive the queen herself eats nothing. She is, perchance, ill."

Xerxes looked searchingly into the face of his queen.

"You have something you would say to me, my Esther. And you do well to speak of all that is in your heart, for I grant it now—even to the half of my kingdom. But first eat a little, I pray you. You are too pale and wan, my Queen, for one who has nothing to fear."

She looked up at him in a sudden passion of gratitude, a mist of tears clouding her sweet eyes.

"I should fear much," she faltered, "since I am sorely at fault."

"Sorely at fault in that you did not trust me, even as you loved me," he murmured in her ear. "But love pays all debts."

When the fruit was finally placed before the banqueters, and the hidden music had retreated to a distance, the king with a barely perceptible motion of his hand dismissed the attendants.

There was tense silence for a space in the gorgeous room. So still was it that the trill of a belated bird in the garden without, and the subdued splash and tinkle of the fountains could be distinctly heard. Esther's heart fluttered in her throat as she looked from the dark face of the king to the coarse features of Haman, flushed with much eating and drinking. She feared both men, but in the one case a passionate love dominated fear, and in the other hatred and disgust augmented it.

At last Xerxes, observing the quick rise and fall of the rose-colored pearls upon the bosom of his queen, and the changing color that spoke in her face, said quietly:

"What is your petition, Queen Esther?—and it shall be granted you; and what is your request?—and it shall be performed, even to the half of my kingdom, which is mine and thine."

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Then the queen took heart of grace; for she knew that what she would reveal would in no wise anger the king, since he knew it already, and loved her in spite of it.

"If I have found favor in thy sight, O King, and if it please the king," said she, "let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. If we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen I had been silent, though the man that designed the plot against us could in no wise repay the king for the ruin it would bring upon the empire."

"Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?" demanded the king, and his eyes began to dart the fierce lightnings of wrath which his subjects justly feared more than the bolts of the invisible gods.

Esther had risen from her place, and stood, tall and beautiful in her robes of white and gold as some terrible yet lovely spirit of destruction sent forth to punish the sins of gross humanity. Her eyes, the eyes of insulted majesty, of injured wifhood, blazed upon the man who covered among the purple cushions of his couch like one stricken with paralysis.

"The man who would cause me to be slain, with my people, upon the day of his choosing, is this wicked Haman. Ask him, King of Persia, why he desires to slay the Jews, who are the hereditary enemies of the Amalekites? Ask him, also, what means the secret arming of those same descendants of Agag through all the provinces?"

The king sprang from his place as a sudden illumining flash showed him the vile plot in all its naked enormity and, with an incoherent exclamation, strode out into the garden of the palace. He felt that he could not face any mortal in this supreme moment of his abasement, least of all the man who had tricked him, played with him, insulted him, laughed at his weak compliance and his utter folly. It

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was one of those frightful moments when the soul, stripped of all shielding illusions, sees itself as it is, and loathes the sight. In that moment Xerxes, the Great King, beheld himself what his enemies and detractors both then and afterwards declared him to be—weak, easily led, puerile in his outbursts of passion, selfish, fickle, boastful, cruel, superstitious—the despot in the most contemptible of all his aspects.

He saw his empire declining, not only in territorial greatness, but in administrative vigor and national spirit. In that hour, pale specters of the past and still more dreadful spirits of the future held sway over him. The great drops rolled from his brow like rain; he groaned aloud in the anguish of his spirit. Then the thought of his wife, Esther, the beautiful, innocent girl, whom by his cruel folly he had condemned to be the sport of his own worst enemy, fell upon him like a scourge. Even now she was alone and at the mercy of the man who, of all others, should never have been permitted to gaze upon her exquisite purity.

Inspired with this new passion of revenge the king rushed back to the banqueting hall, where he beheld what filled him with fresh fury.

Haman, ever a coward, and pierced now through all the futile armor of his arrogance and pride with the sharp certainty of death and ruin, had forced himself to rise from his place, to utter words of passionate entreaty, of utter humility and self-abasement. In his insane effrontery he even ventured to remind the queen of the conversation which had taken place between them before the entrance of the king.

“Did I not swear that I would save you?” he whined. “Was I not ready to make you happy; to give you all in my power? Do not turn away your beautiful face! Nay, but you shall hear me! I will force you to listen. See! the king has gone away; he is angry with us both! You cannot be sure what turn his fury will take. Look you, I will beg him for our lives. I am strong! I am great!

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And do you entreat him to spare me! Tell him not to kill me! I—I love you! I love you—have mercy—have—mercy——”

So, mouthing and stammering his wild supplications, he sank upon his knees beside her couch and slavered like a beast upon her robe, her hands, her feet. Esther shrank away from the man's hateful touch with a faint scream of terror; and hearing this, the king, who had gained the doorway, spoke terrible sentence of doom.

At this word of the king's, all his boasted strength forsook Haman, and his limbs became as the limbs of a dead man; like death, also, was his awful face. He fell forward upon the couch of the queen and begged his life at her hands in wild and incoherent words.

“Save me! Save me!” he shrieked, in a high, thin note, out of which all semblance to a human voice had vanished. “I love you—I am your slave! Oh—save me! Save—me! Save——”

The wretched man's last frenzied ravings were cut short as two of the queen's eunuchs, obeying the silent gesture of the king, dragged him backward, his face close covered with his own gorgeous mantle.

One of these alert officials, observing the confusion of the king's mind, spoke the thought that had visited him earlier in the day.

“May the Great King permit his servant to speak of the gallows fifty cubits high, which this Haman has lately caused to be constructed in his house for Matacas, who once saved the king's life?”

“Take him away,” said the king hastily, “and hang him thereon!”

That same day, an hour before sunset, the tree of death bore fruit. And Zarara, the wife of Haman, beholding it with her youngest born clasped in her arms made no moan.

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But she climbed, the child still close wound in her arms, to the roof of the palace which she and her husband had reared on the blood and infamy of a lifetime, and looking for the last time into the glazed eyes of the only man she had ever loved, she threw herself down into the paved courtyard below. And so both mother and child found such peace as a hurried escape out of this present evil world may furnish.





XXXV



HT evening the king walked with his queen in the privacy of the garden where they had first met, and Esther told the king all the story of her life, as she would fain have told it in the beginning but for the express command of her kinsman, Mordecai. She spoke of her childhood, passed in the close seclusion of home, where Mordecai had taught her the Persian tongue, with all the care and skill at his command.

“Always,” she said, “I spoke the Persian with Mordecai; but with Abihail I spoke the Hebrew tongue, though she, also, spoke the Persian with the vendors of fowls and vegetables, yet haltingly. And Mordecai forbade her to speak the beautiful language of the country with me, lest I should also learn her strange, uncouth manner of speech. I was taught to read and to write both in Persian and in Hebrew; and from Abihail I learned how to spin and how to shape the cakes of meal for the baking. Thus quietly and in humble work the days passed. Never beheld I the great

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sights of the city or the palace, for Mordecai was wont to declare that a maid should sleep and rise again in such peace as the four walls of home provided. So was I sheltered and guarded."

"And were you happy, my Star?" asked Xerxes, half afraid to question her, lest something not to his liking should escape her lips.

"Yes, truly, I was very, very, happy," she answered. "Yet it was the happiness of the little child who understands nothing of life or its mysteries."

"And had you no friends save Matacas and the woman?" he asked again, his face clouding as he remembered the comely features of the Prince of Edom.

"I had a brother," she said simply. "He was not in truth the son of my mother; but he was of close kin to me, being descended from Jeconiah, that king of Judah whom the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar carried away into captivity. There were but the two of us, and Mordecai was also his guardian."

The king waited for her to go on, in silence which she could not but understand.

"It is not," she said, stammering a little in her embarrassment, "for me to say, yet it is in my heart to tell the king that this prince, who is of kin to me, is beloved by Amytis, daughter of the king."

"Does the Commander of the Immortals return the affection of the daughter of Xerxes; or has he raised his eyes still higher?" asked the king in a constrained voice.

Esther laid her hand upon his arm with a daring freedom new to her.

"Will the king look into my eyes?" she entreated.

He turned her face upward with the tip of his brown forefinger, and looked steadily into it.

"What read you?" she asked.

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“Much pain, sweet—that is past; and the traces of recent tears.”

“What beside?”

“Love!” he murmured passionately. “Is it all and always for me, my Esther?”

“Nay, I answer not, since my heart is open to you at last, like the pages of a book. Read, I pray you, and tell me what you read.”

He bent to look yet more piercingly into the dark eyes.

“Mine!” he whispered at last. “All and eternally mine! I could not believe it, because I do not deserve it. I am not worthy, yet I could not bear my life were it otherwise.”

He kissed her then, full upon the lips. And she knew that all was once more right between them. Yet the future stretched before her, dark and threatening, and she feared what even the morrow might bring.

“What troubles you, sweet?” he asked.

And she answered with tears. “The thirteenth day of Adar, my Lord King, and the decree that may not be altered weighs upon my heart. Can I rejoice, think you—even in your love—when my people rest under condemnation of death, and even now the net tightens around them?”

He drew his brows together in deep thought.

“You spoke but lately of the Hebrews as the foes of the Amalekites, and of the secret arming of those same Amalekites throughout my kingdom. Tell me more of this, my queen. How came you to know of it? What, think you, does it portend?”

“It can portend nothing, now that the author of the conspiracy is dead,” she made answer. “But this is the story, which as yet I have told to no one. Among my chamberlains I found one whom I could trust, and to this man I said, ‘Go into the city of Shushan and into the twelve great cities of Persia, Babylonia, Assyria, and Media; and

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into those provinces, also, which border upon the coast and the great desert, and search in every place for the Hebrews; find out their condition and the places of their habitancy, whether they be rich, powerful, and numerous; find out, also, who are their enemies, and why. 'Tell me these things,' I commanded him, 'as speedily as may be.' Harbonah, whom the king gave me to serve in my house, was wiser than I, and he caused many men in the cities and provinces to spy out all that I wished to know, and yesterday he brought me word. 'The Amalekites both hate and oppress the Hebrews in every town, city, and province,' quoth he; 'and these ancient enemies of the Jews are receiving weapons, swords, spears, and deadly slings, and in secret they are making others like them.' I am but a woman, my Lord King, but the saying was plain to me. With all the Hebrews dead, and armed with many weapons, what would hinder these myriads of Amalekites, with Haman at their head, from attempting to wrest the crown from the Achæmenian line? I am but a woman; but I am also the daughter of warrior kings, and these thoughts visited me in the secret sanctuary where I pray upon my knees to Jehovah, the God of the Hebrews."

Xerxes gazed steadily at his queen. "The wisdom of the All-Wise," he said, "is oftentimes hid from the king and his warriors, and made plain to the pure and innocent in heart. You have saved not only your people, my queen, but also my kingdom; and from thenceforth you shall share my counsels."

On that day the king sent for Mordecai. The Hebrew had gone to his house, followed by the curses of Haman, after the counselor had stripped from him the king's purple which the scribe had worn for an hour; and in his house Mordecai again laid the sackcloth upon his shoulders, and beat upon his breast before the unseen Presence whom he worshiped.

"O Lord God of Israel!" he prayed. "Have mercy

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upon thy people and upon the queen, whom I, in my folly, prevented from speaking truth to the king, when in her innocence she would have done so. Verily, I perceive, now that it is too late, all my grievous errors. Had she told the king of her people, this wicked Haman could not have persuaded Xerxes to the course which he has taken. But even now, O Lord, our God, thou canst overrule my foolishness with thine eternal wisdom! Thou canst cause light to appear in darkness, and the brightness of thy rising is the terror of night. Thou art a king who, sitting upon the throne of judgment in the heavens, scattereth away all evil with thine eyes. The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, thou, O Lord, hast made even both of them; and it is thine to withhold clear vision and right understanding, and also to give it again. And now, Lord, behold the abasement of thy servant, and help us right speedily, before ever the day of blood dawns, or the morning in which our enemies shall whet the sword against the lives of thy servants!"

And having prayed after this fashion with all his heart, Mordecai felt suddenly comforted of his sorrow, and a strange light of assurance penetrated his forebodings, and scattered them every one, as the beams of the rising sun scatter the mists of night.

He arose, therefore, at the call of Abihail, and laid aside his sackcloth for the last time, and washed his hands and anointed his head with fragrant oil. He also, for the first time in many days, ate meat and drank wine in his house. This done, he sat again upon his mule and set forth to the palace, thinking to go to his work, to which in his mourning he had paid scant heed of late.

As he went, the mule slow stepping amid the dust of the street through which he had lately ridden upon the king's horse, he paid no heed to the people that followed him, nor to the children who called after him shrilly: "There goes the man whom the king delights to honor!"

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Clearly, Mordecai, the Jew, was now a notable figure; all the inhabitants of Shushan had his name in their mouths, and many wondered what would be done with the Hebrew, now that he had worn the purple. And some said that it was arranged by Haman, that afterwards he might accuse his enemy of having overridden the existing laws, in consenting to put on the king's garment, which offense was punishable with death. So a great multitude gathered, following the slow-stepping mule which bore the grave, gaunt figure of Mordecai, now wasted to a yet severer aspect by many days of rigorous fasting and strong praying.

But Mordecai heeded nothing of the multitude which buzzed at his back. He was in truth thinking of many things, and, after his wont, blind and deaf to all that went on in the outward world. And chiefly he thought of the queen, who to-day entertained the king and Haman at a banquet, and he wondered if she had spoken the truth at last, as he had bidden her; or if her weak woman's heart had failed her once again, as on the day before.

And of Haman he meditated that not long could the boaster sustain himself in the frothing sea of the king's favor, marveling also at the blindness of Xerxes in seeking wise counsel at the mouth of a blatant fool.

It was a great and echoing cry arising from the mouth of the populace, which now crowded his beast on every hand, that aroused Mordecai from the thoughts which held him, and once more alive to the world about him, he lifted his eyes and beheld a strange sight. Above him towered a monstrous gibbet high in air; and upon it, dangling in mid-heaven, like a gaudy popinjay upon a string, hung a glittering figure, the sun striking sparks of splendor from the gold and jewels of its garb; its pigmy sword, also, was seen thrust in its golden belt, and its mantle streamed wide in the fresh wind. Such haste had the servants of the queen made to carry out the order of Xerxes that they had not stopped

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even to clothe the wretched criminal in the decent and sober garb of death, but had hung him there in all the glittering gauds for which he had sold his honor and his life.

Mordecai, scarce comprehending what this dreadful sight might mean, yet perceiving even in his dumb amaze that his enemy had fallen, and that he would trouble him no more, after a long look with unbelieving eyes, went his way toward the palace, followed by no one at all. For the people, beholding the enemy of Mordecai dead upon the gallows, were all at once smitten with fear and respect for the man who had worn the king's purple.

"Even now," said they, "he goes to receive power and honor and high office at the hand of the king."

Such sudden degradations, deaths, and dishonors were not infrequent occurrences in the kingdom of Media and Persia; and by this everyone knew that the queen was a Hebrew and of kin to Matacas. For Abihail had told it in strict secrecy to the woman who lived across the street, and also to a merchant who sold oil, and was wealthy and well thought of; and each of these excellent persons had told the secret to one or two others (under strict seal of silence); and these also had gone forth, and within the hour had told intimate friends, who straightway whispered it to others, and so on in ever-increasing numbers till the rivulets of information met in the full tide of knowledge.

But now it could not matter, save to the Hebrews themselves, who began to lay aside their sackcloth and wash the ashes from their heads, even though the terrible edict still stood blazoned upon the walls of the city.

And thus it chanced—as often it has been observed, in every day and generation—that while Mordecai knew not what awaited him in the palace at Shushan, every man, woman, and child of the multitudes that gazed after him at a respectful distance knew it right well, and were telling it

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one to the other, with extravagant phrase and gesture. Yet the sight of Haman hanging on his own well-built gibbet, his gay vestures fluttering in the wind, had prepared Matacas somewhat for that which followed straightway upon his entrance to the palace. For here the king's chamberlains met him with profound obeisance and fetched him to the presence chamber.

And as for the rest, is it not written in the Chronicles of the great king Xerxes, the Achæmenian,—may he live forever!—who also is Lord of the Whole World, the King of kings, the Ruler of peoples afar off! And these are the veritable words the scribes of the king wrote concerning Mordecai, the Jew, who came into the king's chamber on the three and twentieth day of the third month, that is the month Sivan.

“Know all men to whom in future generations these chronicles shall be read, that on the three and twentieth day of Sivan, in the twelfth year of Xerxes, the king, there came at the king's bidding a certain man into his presence. And the name of the man was Mordecai, which is called also Matacas. And this Mordecai, being of close kin to Queen Esther, and furthermore being wiser than any of the king's counselors and any of his wise men; wiser also than any of the seven hereditary princes of the kingdom of Media and Persia, the king, in the presence of his princes and nobles and counselors and wise men, did cause to be placed upon the head of Mordecai a diadem of gold, which diadem conferred upon Mordecai a position in the kingdom second only to that of the king. And the king took off his ring (which had been taken from Haman, the Amalekite) and gave it to Mordecai. And the lords of the wardrobe put upon him royal apparel of violet and white, with a garment of fine linen and purple; for being of kin to the queen, he had become even as the king's brother. And so declared the great king, and so caused he proclamation to be made con-

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cerning Mordecai; and he became the first noble in the kingdom.

“And this is the chronicle concerning Mordecai, the Hebrew, written at Shushan, the palace, and sealed with the king’s seal, in the third month, which is the month Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof, in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus, which is Xerxes, the Achæmenian.”

Many other things, also, did the scribes write of all that transpired in Shushan that day. But of these some have been lost, and of those that remain not one tells all the truth, which is known only to a few. Some would have it that Esther was a hard, cruel woman, who gloated openly over the death of her enemy, Haman, and desired nothing but the blood of those who had wronged her. And others say that she coerced the king to his own hurt to set her kinsman, Mordecai, above all the great and wise men in his kingdom. But let the truth be known once and for all time concerning these and other matters: Esther was a sweet and loving woman, wise-hearted above most, and brave above every woman in the world. It is told of her (and no one who lives to-day may deny it) that she begged the lives of the nine surviving sons of Haman from the king. But Mordecai dissuaded her, because they were a turbulent and unruly lot, and even then swearing bloody vengeance upon the king, the queen, and all who served them. Certain it is that none of them long survived, but as to the manner of their death let no one ask. They were not missed in the city of Shushan, where great and important events succeeded one another so fast that the inhabitants were scarce done gaping over one marvelous happening before another had taken its place.

That day, while yet Mithra rode his golden chariot in the west, Mordecai, the new prime minister, held counsel with his royal master as to the manner in which the mischief of Haman could be best undone. The immutable law

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already existed, and it could not be reversed, overridden, or set aside. Nevertheless something must be done, and at once.

“Why did not you annul the decree, while you carried my scepter and wore my crown?” the king asked Mordecai. “My scribes wrote on that day that you refused to save your people—even with the scepter in your grasp.”

Mordecai looked the king straight in the eyes, a thing few men dared to do.

“Because I bore your scepter and wore your crown, I refused,” he said. “Being for an hour the king, I was unable to contravene the king’s law.”

The king marveled at this answer.

“But your own life and the life of the queen, your kinswoman, were at stake,” he urged.

“Even so,” quoth Mordecai, “but would I, think you, make a mock of the king’s laws in the eyes of all Shushan? Not even to save my life or the life of the one most dear to me could I do this thing.”

The king smote upon his knee.

“By the nine attributes of Ormazd,” swore he, “there is no such man in all my kingdom! You are a better man than I, Matacas; for I should have trodden the evil law under foot, and defied the King’s Majesty. I would you had done it!” he groaned.

“There is a certain officer in the king’s army, of the blood of the Hebrews, who besought me on that day to give the Jews leave to defend themselves from the assaults of the enemy. This the King’s Majesty might grant his Hebrew subjects, and in so doing relieve the kingdom of certain turbulent Amalekites.”

“Ay, let the vile brood of Haman be purged from my kingdom,” muttered the king, mindful of what his queen had told him of this captive people, which had never ceased to spring at the strong hand that leashed it since the day of its conquest under Cyrus.

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"Bring the Prince of Edom hither," he commanded. "I will speak with him further concerning this and another matter."

And when the Commander of the Immortals came in a brief space, and bowed himself before the king, Xerxes looked at him earnestly.

"You have a plan by which the Hebrews may save themselves on the thirteenth day of Adar," he said. "How may it be done without any compromise of the king's honor?"

And Nathan answered:

"May it be with all the king's enemies as it will be with the enemies of the Jews on the evening of that day, if the king be pleased to allow my brethren weapons of defense in their hands from the rising up of the sun till the going down of it. There was no word in the former decree to contravene this favor of majesty."

"Bring hither the former writing," commanded Xerxes.

They brought it, and straightway the king dictated a letter in his own words to the satraps and governors of great cities, and when all was finished, he said:

"I have done what I could to undo the former mischief. But alas! to wholly undo any evil under the sun is not in the power of man. Rather let the evil-doer beware, for every deed of wickedness partakes of the nature of the laws of the Medes and Persians, in that it cannot be altered or undone, but ever goes on performing its dark work."

"So also is the good deed in its nature," spoke Mordecai, "and the good differs from the evil as light is different from darkness, in that it overcomes evil, and triumphs, and shall triumph over it gloriously. Let the king be comforted in his heart, for only good shall come out of this seeming evil."

And so the event proved; but of this, more anon. On this day, also, it is recorded that the king spoke to Nathan

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of the Princess Amytis, as kings may speak regarding such matters as the love and marriage of their offspring.

“My daughter Amytis,” quoth he, “has distinguished you above all men by her favor. What have you to say, Prince of Edom?”

And Nathan, bowing himself low so that the plumes of his helmet swept the ground at the king’s feet, made answer that he could say nothing, being overwhelmed with gratitude and humility.

“Do you love the maiden, Prince?” asked the king, willing to know his mind. “She is not, it seems to me, ill-favored—being like myself; and she has refused to marry Mathistan, Prince of Ecbatana; because, it appears, she prefers you.”

And again Nathan expressed his profound gratitude in courtly phrase. “I would serve the royal lady with my life,” he declared, albeit somewhat coldly, to the thinking of Xerxes.

“That being the case,” said the king, “you shall serve the princess in the capacity that she shall choose. I will say no more. I am weary of attempting to arrange anything for the daughter of Xerxes, who seems to have inherited her father’s hot temper with her mother’s stubborn folly of self-will. She must henceforth do even as pleases herself in matters pertaining to her future estate.”

But Nathan, being thus brought face to face with a future of unexampled brilliancy and good fortune, as Mordecai was careful to point out in a subsequent interview between the two men, could only sigh and frown, while he protested that he did not desire a satrapy, great wealth, and a beautiful wife of the blood royal.

“I am a blunt soldier,” he said gloomily, “better fitted for the life of forced marches and rude camps, and doubtless fated to fall a victim to the sword on some far-away battlefield.”

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Mordecai looked at the young man keenly. He was about to apply the knife to an old and festering wound, and he hesitated while he chose the sharpest instrument at his command.

"You are thinking," he said, "of former days, and fancying that you still love Hadassah. Let me tell you, Nathan, that you love a myth, a something that never existed. The child Hadassah was but the bud, of which the queen of Xerxes is the royal flower. She was never yours. Forget that you ever deceived yourself into thinking so."

The Prince of Edom fixed fiery eyes of wrath upon the stern face of the chief counselor.

"Why have you spoken to me of her?" he asked in a smothered voice. "Right well do I know that she was never mine. You stole her from me to exchange for a purple robe. But I cannot raise a dead love from the cold grave where it lies stiff and stark, wound in the cerements of past days, and say to the daughter of Xerxes: 'Here is my love; clasp it to your woman's breast and warm it to a semblance of life!' Nay, I am no thief to steal all that is sweetest and best from another; this I have suffered at your hands; but I will not inflict it. Too well I know the smart of the pain that knows no easement."

"You are," said Mordecai sternly, "speaking that which is unbecoming to a prince of Judah, and which is also untrue. You are offered an alliance with the daughter of the Great King. You cannot—you dare not refuse. If you cannot love the princess you may at least be courteous to her. And when she holds your son, a royal prince of the Achæmenian line, in her arms, you may even find it in your heart to be grateful to Jehovah, who offers you that which the most powerful prince in the kingdom would receive with joy. Besides," he added craftily, "the maiden loves you, and you can save her the bitter pain and humiliation of unrequited affection by showing her such kindness as you are able."

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The Prince of Edom sighed bitterly; then he fell to fingering the gem whereon was engraved the lion hunter of Persia, which Amytis had given him long ago. And by some alchemy of thought her face, with its sparkling blue eyes and fair golden hair shading a brow of marvelous purity, arose before him. It would not, he mused, be difficult to be kind to the princess. And, after all, she had saved his life, which he had sworn should be devoted to her service!

Again he sighed and muttered something unintelligible.

"You will go to her to-day, with the king's permission," said Mordecai firmly. "And you will say to her——"

"Nay, you need not to put words into my mouth, my worshipful Mordecai. Wisdom breathes from your counsels, I doubt not, yet I shall be able to say what I will to the daughter of Xerxes."

"And you will consent to the alliance? I may assure the king of this?"

"You may say to the king that I will be united to the princess at sunset on the thirteenth day of Adar," Nathan said; but his face was not the face of a happy bridegroom.

Mordecai looked the prince straight in the eyes.

"Why do you set that day, of all others?" he asked sharply.

"Because on that day I shall have work to do. I cannot wed till it be accomplished."

"Reconsider, I pray you. The day is ill-omened."

"Not so; it is a good day; a day wherein mercy will come to Israel. And why not wed on such a day? My espousals will be blessed by Heaven."

"The king will not be pleased to put off the matter of the marriage so long. He wishes to see his daughter safely bestowed. Besides, the satrapy of Cyprus is already vacant, and this would be given to you as the husband of Amytis."

"I understand well that Xerxes and Mordecai, also, would be glad of my absence from Shushan. Nevertheless,

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I will not go till the thirteenth of Adar be past. It is spoken. It cannot be unsaid. Go tell the king what I have said. If it displeases him, let him do what he will with the princess."

And with this decision of Nathan's Mordecai was forced to be content; though he did not then understand it.

That night every scribe in the palace was busily at work upon the new edict; and on this occasion there was neither moaning nor tearing of hair on the part of those that labored. As before, the posts were ordered to be ready an hour before dawn; and copies were translated by Matacas himself into the several languages, to be sent into all the one hundred and seven and twenty provinces. And these were the words of the writing:

"Xerxes, the great king, the Achæmenian, and Esther, the queen, to our rulers, and to those who are faithful subjects in all parts of our dominions, greeting!

"Inasmuch as certain men who have been the recipients of our royal bounty in times past have abused our generosity; not scrupling to do evil to us and to such as are our friends; and since they have even used the abundance they have derived from us against the authors of it, supposing that they could conceal their baseness from the All-Wise Ahura-Mazda—to whom be honor and praise—let it be known:

"First: that all such persons—if there be any yet alive—take warning by the fate of Haman, the son of Hamadetha, by birth an Amalekite and alien from the blood of the Persians. This man was hospitably entertained by us, and partook of the kindness which we bear to all men, even to the point of eating at the royal table, and being honored of all men as second in power and glory only to ourselves. But the event proved that he was not able to bear his good fortune, nor govern the magnitude of his prosperity with sound reason. For he made a conspiracy even against us, his sovereigns by divine right; whereby he hoped to destroy the life

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of the great Queen Esther, the consort of Xerxes. And he furthermore designed to deprive us of our most faithful friends and subjects, the Hebrews, who dwell in many of our cities and provinces.

“And second: since we have, by the grace of Ahura-Mazda, arrived at a sound knowledge of the truth concerning these same Hebrews, who were by the arts and wicked machinations of Haman devoted to death and destruction on a certain day, which day is the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is Adar; and since we now have ascertained that these Hebrews are just men, conducting their lives and affairs after the best manner and dedicated to the worship of God, who hath preserved the kingdom to us and to our ancestors of the Achæmenian line, be it hereby known and decreed, after the manner of the laws of the Medes and Persians, the law that altereth not, neither can be broken with impunity by any man, that the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, he celebrated as a holy day. For Ahura-Mazda hath made that day a day of celebration, instead of a day of destruction. Therefore, let it be a good day to all who wish us well, and a memorial of the punishment which hath already overtaken the vile conspirator, Haman, and which shall in the future overtake all men of like evil intent. Also, it is decreed that on that day, which is the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, shall all the Hebrews gather themselves together, to stand for their lives; and to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish all persons in whatever province or city they may be found, who shall lay hands on them to do them hurt: And the spoil of such persons shall the Hebrews take for a prey.

“And, third: be it hereby known that it is the royal will and pleasure of Xerxes, the Achæmenian, and of Esther, his queen and consort, that every person and every city and every nation that shall disobey or contravene anything that

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is contained in this epistle shall be straightway destroyed by fire and the sword. And we do give you charge, that you publicly proclaim, set forth, and cause to be known in all places over which you bear authority; which authority is deputed to you by the grace of your sovereigns by divine right, all the words of this writing: to the effect that the Hebrews in all parts of our dominions shall be honorably entreated of our subjects; and further, that they be peaceably permitted to enjoy their own laws. And that you assist them by every means at your command to defend themselves from unjust violence on every day, and particularly on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is Adar. Failing in any of these requirements, you may justly expect no other than the fate of Haman, whom we have this day caused to be hung and to perish upon a gallows in this our city and palace of Shushan.

“Written by the scribes of the king at Shushan, the palace, and sealed with the king’s seal on the three and twentieth day of the third month, which is the month Sivan.”

So the posts that rode upon swift horses and upon mules and upon camels went out, being hastened and pressed by the king’s commandment. And the decree was published, also, at Shushan, both in the palace and in the city. That day the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. The Jews also had lights in all their houses, and there was much feasting, and joy and gladness was upon every tongue. In every province and in every city whithersoever the king’s commandment and his decree came, from India even unto Ethiopia, in all the hundred and twenty and seven provinces, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And it is told, also, that certain of the people of the land became Jews; for fear of the Jews fell upon them one and all.

During all these days of stir and excitement, during which the national policies of the kingdom of Persia were

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thus suddenly changed, Mathistan, Prince of Ecbatana, still remained at the palace, and unmindful of the scant attention he received continued to press his private affairs upon Xerxes in season and out of season. He could not, he represented with some show of fairness, return to Ecbatana unaccompanied by a royal bride. And this he represented urgently to Mordecai, also, in his new estate as prime minister of the kingdom, when he could not by any means obtain the king's ear.

The erstwhile scribe heard him patiently, as was his custom.

"You are not, I presume, insistent that it shall be the Princess Amytis who shall accompany you to your capital?" he inquired mildly.

And Mathistan swore by all the gods that he was not insistent upon this point.

"The woman has insulted me!" he said, ruffling all his feathers like one of the quarrelsome game-cocks in the royal pens. "But I will not depart without a bride. I have sworn it."

"There is," said Mordecai, yet more pacifically, "a royal princess of Media, whom the Queen Atossa has under her protection. She was designed by the queen mother for the king himself; but inasmuch as Xerxes will take no more wives at present, why do not you marry her? She is, like yourself, of the blood of Astyages, and fair to look upon."

At first Mathistan declared that he would not marry a Median princess. But later when at a banquet which Atossa was prevailed upon to give (by what means only Mordecai could have told) he saw the plump, pink and white, somewhat dull, maiden, called Artisonna, of whose society Atossa was by this time heartily weary; and when Artisonna (also fatigued by the life at Shushan) cast languishing glances at the royal Median, whom she admired excessively, he became

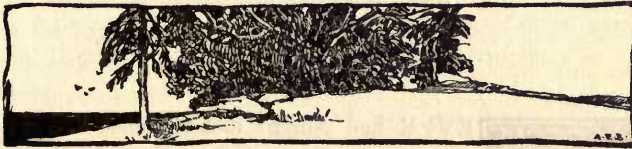
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appeased to the point of graciousness. And in a week's time the marriage was arranged, Xerxes gladly bestowing a magnificent dowry upon the bride, commensurate with his own royal state and the depth of his obligations to the complacent Mathistan, who from a threatened enemy became henceforth a devoted and loyal subject.

All these and other matters did Mordecai arrange for the king with surpassing wisdom. There were those, indeed, who found him hard and unbending (notably the nine turbulent sons of Haman). And this was well, since many affairs had become inextricably tangled both in civil and military circles. And to all these and similar problems did Mordecai apply his vast stores of knowledge of men and affairs, his distinguished sagacity and patience, and his adamant firmness, with the result that out of the threatened ruin and disintegration of the kingdom there came presently a calm and settled aspect of things which restored confidence and harmony. And all this was accomplished with so much apparent ease that Xerxes was conscious only of the peaceful and pleasurable results. No longer was it necessary to resort to the frightful punishments with which it had seemed necessary to intimidate evil-doers under former systems of government. So that for the space of a year not one prominent person was suffocated with ashes, nor suffered the untold pain and humiliation of having his tongue torn out by the roots. Not one criminal was flayed alive in the public square, as had been the horrid practice of Haman; nor did the traveler suffer the sight of numerous robbers buried to the neck along the highway, and shrieking out their dying torments. Women, for the first time in many years, were comparatively safe, and children received an attention and care new in the annals of Persian government. In a word, those just and humane and advanced principles of government, first given to the Hebrew lawgiver on Mount Sinai, and since embodied in the ten laws known to every

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devout Jew, were promulgated and decreed and observed to a degree unknown before, in all the one hundred and twenty and seven provinces from Ind to Ethiopia. But all this did not come about at once; but by degrees, and in ways not always clear to the reigning monarch.





XXXVI



EVER had Amytis looked more bewitching than when for the first time she received Nathan, Prince of Edom, in the royal garden pavilion. She was garbed all in white, and the lovely simplicity of her garments, like rose petals folding softly one above another, was not marred by any garish ornament. She trembled slightly, as a rose also trembles when it unfurls its scented leaves to the breath of summer, when she beheld the martial young figure of the Commander of the Immortals approaching.

He came up to her swiftly, and dropping upon one knee, pressed his lips to the white hand which she extended to him.

"Sweet Princess," he murmured, "I am your bondman from this day, and for always."

Her eyes beamed ecstatic happiness upon him.

"You have spoken with the king?" she whispered.

He bowed his head.

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“Would I dare, think you, to speak with you thus—and here, had I not the permission of Xerxes?”

The rosy color which had flooded the face of the young girl at the touch of his lips upon her hand paled a little.

“Tell me,” she cried imperiously, “just what was said. I could not bear——”

She stopped short and fixed her blue eyes upon his face.

“I would hear one thing from you,” she murmured. “Do you not know what it is, or must I put the words into your mouth?”

He took her hand and led her to a marble bench heaped with cushions.

“Let us sit here, Princess, and speak of all that is in our hearts to say. We must needs know each other better than at present, if we are to expect any happiness in the future.”

His words caused a flush of joy to mount to her cheeks, while she trembled with sweet terror at his touch; yet the indefinable sadness of his voice made itself felt in all her joy.

She raised her eyes timidly to the dark, handsome face bent toward her.

“You have not yet told me that you love me,” she whispered.

“Words are but weak things,” he said gravely. “Let the strong devotion of a life speak for me.”

“Yet I would hear you say it,” she persisted, anxious as any shepherdess to taste the sweet folly of love as she had dreamed it.

“Nay, let me ask you. Do you love me, Princess?”

“Do I love you? Ah, you know that I do. Almost am I ashamed that you know it already; yet the daughter of the Great King must know no shame. So I say to you freely, I love you; with all my heart and soul I love you. In truth and purity I love you. For your sake I would resign life itself and all that is dear and beautiful in the world. With

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you I would sleep in the cold grave, rather than wake without you in the sunshine."

His eyes filled with a mist of tears. Ah, this was indeed true love; no one knew it better than he. And how must he reward this devotion, which indeed spoke eloquently in word, yet far more eloquently in the sweet face uplifted to his. He resolved on a sudden that there should be naught but perfect truth between them. Nay, more; he would surrender his bruised life into her tender keeping, to heal if this might be.

"May I tell you everything about myself?" he asked, taking her soft fingers in his own and holding them close.

"Ah, yes; tell me everything—even though it will hurt me to know that you have loved another. But you will love me; will not you?"

He could not resist the appeal in her eyes.

"I should be an ingrate did I not love you with the truest devotion of which my heart is capable," he answered in all sincerity. "But I have been sorely wounded, sweet Princess, and I fear that I cannot make you as happy as you deserve."

She dropped her eyes with a sigh.

"Tell me all," she said.

"You know something of my birth and parentage," he began.

"Yes," she said briefly. "The woman Abihail told me that you were of the blood royal and of kin to Esther."

"That is true. I am of kin to Hadassah—who is now called Esther—and a ward of Mordecai's. This explains how it was that we were brought up like brother and sister."

His voice was calm and unconstrained, and Amytis breathed a faint sigh of relief.

"And truly," he continued, after a brief silence, "Hadassah loved me even as a brother. Of this I am now confident; though when we were together in the old days I

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hoped—I believed that she loved me, even as I loved her. It is past now, and I shall not again speak of it, since Haddassah has become Esther, and is now the king's wife. But for this once I must speak, because I——”

He paused for a few slow heart-beats; then went on, his head drooped, his eyes clouded with sadness.

“She did not love me as I loved her,” he went on; “but love, like the wind, comes when and where it will. It cannot be forced. It cannot be denied. Since then I have been as a wraith walking among living men. I have wooed death more ardently than a man woos the mistress he adores; but death also passed me by. Twice has my horse been stricken under me; thrice have I plucked a spent arrow from my helmet. And once a spear aimed directly at my heart struck the amulet you gave me long ago, and fell harmless at my feet.”

He felt her hand tremble in his clasp; but she said nothing.

“And now,” he said, looking deep into her eyes, “love again knocks at my door; but the heart within seems dead, and cannot rise and open. What must I do?”

“Your heart is not dead!” she cried passionately. “It is cruelly hurt, perchance, and untended by any loving hand hath languished long; but it may be healed and live again.”

“Knowing this, my Amytis, do you still love me?” he asked.

“I but love you the more,” she whispered, “because you need me.”

And the heart he had supposed long since dead and wrapped in cold cerements of the past stirred a little within his breast, as he gazed at the woman who had listened to his confession so bravely, yet whose eyes, even as she spoke, were glistening with tears of anguish for his hurts and her own. He opened his arms wide to her.

“Come to me, my Amytis,” he said tenderly. “May

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the gods count me accursed if I do not cherish thee with all the tenderness of my soul!"

And Amytis was well content as she rested in his loved embrace and felt his kiss upon her forehead; for she believed that she could yet banish this pale wraith of an affection which had never really lived; since love is true and vital only when it springs from two hearts, and is enfolded warmly between them.

While the young lovers talked thus together in the closed pavilion of the king's garden, and the autumn winds wailed without, whirling the dead leaves in vain assaults against its marble walls, and bowing the faded flowers earthward, where they were soon to lie forgotten in the promise of another spring, two queens were holding converse of quite another sort in an apartment of the royal house, known as the Palace of Rhododendrons.

Here the mother of Amytis, now supinely lapsed into an unlovely middle age, talked with that redoubtable personage, Queen Atossa, who appeared to have arrived at that period of life where a woman of intellect often lingers apparently unchanged from year to year, defiant of time, and resenting the encroachments of old age.

Atossa was, as usual, vividly alive from the crown of her head to the tips of her little feet, encased in their high-heeled shoes, whose golden heels tapped angrily upon the marble of the pavement, as she endeavored to infuse something of her own life and energy into the large, supine figure reposed among the purple cushions of the divan.

"What you say is quite, quite true," sighed Amestris, her dull face twisted into a semblance of grief. "But alas! I am helpless. I have no influence whatever over Amytis. She is too much like her father—willful, imprudent, hasty in her judgment—to listen to counsel which I am ever ready to bestow."

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“Of course you are helpless, Amestris,” snapped Atossa. “And shortly your women will be obliged to employ eunuchs to lift you on and off your couch. Your flesh is increasing beyond anything I have ever seen. Yet you still persist in sweetmeats, I am told, and in the sipping of sherbets mixed with honey. You should starve a week, were I in control of your table, instead of being stuffed five times a day like a peacock.”

“I am sure I am glad that you cannot control my food and drink,” Amestris returned, with some show of spirit. “I care not any more for my appearance. And why, indeed, should I care? No one whose opinion I value admires me any more. I will also tell you that I do not—and have never—eaten five times in a day. At sunrise my women fetch me a draught of milk mixed with a certain cordial, which my physicians have recommended, and which I find requisite to my health. Indeed, I should not venture to rise without it. An hour before noonday, having eaten nothing, I partake of a little food; a bit of broiled fowl, perhaps, with some fruit and bread, a few cakes, and a cup of mild wine—nothing heavy, I assure you. In the afternoon, after my siesta, which no one may neglect who values health, I sip a sherbet and eat a morsel of the white honey cake, which my cook compounds to perfection. Really, my Atossa, it is beyond anything I have seen, even on your own table, or on the table of the king. And you know I used to dine with Xerxes frequently before my misfortune.”

The divorced queen raised her handkerchief to her eyes, while her dull voice droned on. “Of course, having eaten nothing all day, as I have described to you, I am faint with hunger when the hour of banqueting arrives, and at this hour I permit myself a full meal of such viands as my physicians approve. And may I ask you, have you tasted the new dish composed of birds of various sorts, drawn and stuffed with bread crumbs soaked in oil and flavored with

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garlic, then roasted carefully before a slow fire? If you have not, let me urge you——”

“Faugh! I cannot abide garlic in anything, and you keep yourself continuously steeped in it, I perceive,” interrupted Atossa contemptuously. “It is the flavor most liked by the Hebrews, I am told, so perchance you will be reconciled to your Hebrew son-in-law and to the half Hebrew grandchildren who will presently gambol about you.”

“I had not thought of grandchildren,” Amestris returned eagerly. “It will be pleasant to again caress a little child, and to feel that it is, in a way, my own. But Amytis, they say, will not live at Shushan. So perhaps, after all, I shall be alone.”

Atossa burst into one of her fits of wicked laughter.

“No; Amytis will not reside at Shushan; of this you may be well assured, since she is to marry a lover of that wonderful Esther, who is having all things her own way in these days. Xerxes will see to it that the young Prince of Edom, as they call him, is removed to some distant satrapy, well out of sight and sound of the court.”

“Perhaps she will be happier so,” sighed Amestris vaguely. “I see no advantage in living at court.”

The old queen struck her staff sharply upon the floor.

“Look at me!” she commanded.

Amestris started with an affected shiver.

“You are so unnecessarily abrupt,” she complained. “And you know that I cannot bear any disturbing sounds whatever since my misfortune. My physicians have forbidden——”

“Fool!” muttered Atossa. “If it were not for the fact that I must have your money I would not trouble to talk with you.”

“My money!” exclaimed Amestris, half raising herself among her cushions, and speaking with surprising energy. “You have money enough of your own. You cannot have

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mine. I am saving it all for my poor children," she concluded, sinking back with a moan.

"They are likely enough to need it," agreed Atossa caustically. "Xerxes pays little heed to his sons, who are growing up into idle revelers. They should be trained into hardy warriors and sagacious rulers under the strictest surveillance; but nothing is being done for their education, as it should be. I am old now, and I cannot do what I would for my grandsons; but being old I have also the eye which looks into the future, and I see—*terrible things!*"

Amestris, ever the most superstitious of women, repressed a faint scream. And, indeed, the appearance of the old queen was little short of terrifying, as she stood on tiptoe, her thin figure strained upward, her fiery blue eyes fixed and staring.

"I see," muttered Atossa, observing the effect of this, her theatrical art, upon her daughter-in-law, with sly satisfaction, "the Achæmenian line—the royal blood of the great Cyrus and the no less great Darius—being diverted into base channels. I see—a half-Hebrew prince, son of Xerxes, son of Esther the Jewess, who has stolen your name and place, sitting upon the throne of Persia and Media. He is married to a Hebrew wife. All his counselors and ministers are Hebrews. His children are Hebrew. Beyond, in the sacred hills where lie the dishonored remains of Xerxes and his three murdered sons——"

Amestris shrieked aloud.

"Forbear!" she entreated. "I cannot listen any more!"

"—*his three murdered sons,*" repeated Atossa in hollow tones, "for all are fallen beneath the sword of the alien prince who sits upon the throne of dead Xerxes. I see the sacred altars thrown down, and the pure worship of Ahura-Mazda replaced with the worship of Jehovah, whose altars are ever drenched with the blood of base animals, and whose priests despise the truth taught by our sacred Zoroaster.

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All this I see, and more. I see an aged woman, bereft of her children, of her fortune, of her luxuries, living alone and almost untended in one of the meanest of the chambers allotted to the concubines. Who is this woman?"

Atossa's voice sank to a rasping whisper. She strained her terrible eyes yet wider.

"I see clearly now! The woman is old and weary of life; yet death comes not to relieve her. She is half blind, sick, sorrowful, lonely, despised; for she is the discarded queen of the king who long since died at the hand of a Hebrew slave—slain that his Hebrew son might reign in his stead. The woman is Amestris, sport of the gods! sport of the Hebrews, who have made of her a byword and a hissing! 'Look,' say they, 'at the woman who would not raise so much as a finger to save her own flesh and blood! Look at the ugly ruin which, they say, was once a beautiful woman and a queen! Look at the imbecile who might have made strong the dynasty of the Achæmenidæ, but who chose instead to lie among soft cushions all day, eating and drinking the fat of Persia! Let her starve! Let her perish with hunger! Let her dead flesh also be exposed to scorn and——'"

"Stop! You shall stop!" cried Amestris, in tones of frenzied supplication. She sprang from her divan and grasped the old queen by the shoulders. "Stop! Do you hear me? These things shall never be! I, Amestris, will prevent them! I—nay, what shall I do?"

She was about to sink back among her cushions in a paroxysm of weak sobbing, but Atossa craftily caught her by the hand, and pulled her by main force away from the divan.

"I have frightened you, have I?" she said. "Well, I am glad of it. For mark you, woman, every word that I have spoken is true prophecy, and will surely come to pass if you do not set your face against it like a flint. I will help you; but I am old, and my strength wavers, nor have I gold

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enough in my treasury at present to do what must be done. Now listen!"

For Amestris was already arranging the folds of her veil, and twisting the bracelets on her fat arms so as to bring the jewels into view. "Listen, I say, if for one moment you can keep your silly thoughts from roaming."

"I am listening," replied Amestris sulkily; "but you frightened me so that I ought, I am sure, to take some cordial. My very lips are dry and burning, as if you had seared them with a hot iron. Let me order sherbet, I beg!"

"Do it, and I will leave you, never to return! This is no time to be sipping sherbets."

Amestris sighed, her eyes wandering to the curtained doorway, beyond which her slaves ever waited to do her bidding.

"At least," she said, "permit me to sit down. I am positively unable to stand, I tremble so excessively, and my heart——"

"Sit here, then, and pay strict attention to what I shall say."

And Atossa pushed a chair toward her daughter-in-law with an impatient hand.

"Esther, Mordecai, and this Prince of Edom, who has dared to raise his eyes to my granddaughter—all three must be put out of the way. But how?"

"It is not difficult to make people ill, I have heard, through their food," hesitated Amestris. "I never did anything of the sort. I could not; but you——"

"I should not hesitate to poison them," the old queen said, with a cold malignity of purpose in her eyes, before which the younger woman trembled vaguely. "But Mordecai—may the curses of Ahriman light upon him—has replaced every attendant of Xerxes by Hebrews, and——"

"Xerxes!" murmured Amestris, clutching at the arms of her chair. "You would not poison your own son!"

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"No, fool. But the attendants of Xerxes are now those of Esther, the Babylonish Hebrew—at least at table. They eat from the same dishes every day—my son and the Jewess—and what reaches her must also reach him. Do you not see? And I cannot buy her eunuchs. I have tried."

"You might more easily manage the case of the two men," suggested Amestris, "though I like not to think of my daughter grieving over the man she loves. She would never forgive me if she knew I talked with you thus."

"Forgive you? Had you thought of asking the forgiveness of Amytis? Repeat to anyone a syllable of what I have said to you to-day, and your next food shall contain a substance which will cause you to die in agonies. Not too soon, either. You would linger long enough to exchange farewell curses with me, I promise you that!"

"I—I—swear to you that I will tell no one! Only do not tamper with my food, dear, good queen! Nay, you have already frightened me so that I fear I shall be unable to eat, even in mine own poor house, where Xerxes would have me dwell in such peace and happiness as I can find away from him. You will promise me not to—to—*poison me?* I—I entreat you, great queen!"

"I'll not poison you, if you are careful to do as I bid you."

"I will! I will! I am ready to do even now whatever you require."

"Well, then, I require nothing at present beyond ten thousand darics. This I must have to carry out my purposes."

"Ten thousand darics! Nay, I have them not. But you mean silver darics. Of course, I had not considered."

"I mean gold darics. And you will get them for me, or—" The old queen made a significant gesture.

"You do not care about the future of your children, I perceive," she went on, "nor have you any regard for the

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Achæmenian line; but your body and its sensations, pleasurable or otherwise, interests you intensely. So also is it with meaner animals. But so be it. Furnish me the gold, and you shall live to eat peaceably, and die of your surfeit when the gods will. Fail me, and you die at the hour and in the manner I shall choose."

Amestris moistened her dry lips with another longing look toward the curtained doorway, from behind which delicious odors were beginning to find their way. It was the hour for the noonday breakfast, but Atossa was merciless.

"I will try to do what I can to gather the enormous sum you have mentioned," she said with scant breath. "More than that I cannot say now."

Atossa stared at her keenly.

"You are thinking of your food again," she said viciously, "and of the delicacies your slaves are preparing even now for your palate. But you have not asked me why I require all this gold. You merely wish to rid yourself of me in order that you may feed in your trough of gold."

This last insult proved too much for the overwrought nerves of the weak, easily influenced woman, whose interest in life had indeed narrowed to the scant circumference of a golden dish. She burst into loud weeping.

"You are a wicked, cruel woman!" she managed to articulate between her sobs. "I fear and hate you more than I can say. Poison me, if you will. I shall but fly away beyond your reach. I did not ask you why you wish to rob me, because I know right well that it can only mean death and dishonor to some unhappy person. And I am not a murderess, whatever else I may be!"

Atossa rushed to the door in a foaming rage.

"I shall send a slave for the gold to-morrow!" she cried. "I shall use it and you as I will! But you mistake, glutton; I am a patriot and the preserver of the kingdom—*not a murderess!*"



XXXVII



O Mordecai, absorbed in his new and arduous duties, and to Esther, happier than she had dreamed in the renewed trust and confidence of the king, and in the realization of splendid success, there came no thought of that ancient and crafty spider, Atossa, spinning, noiselessly and in secret, a vast, far-reaching web, meant to entangle and destroy every Hebrew in Persia.

To the perfecting of her schemes Atossa bent every energy of a keen and powerful intellect. For once in her life she cast aside all mean and petty self-interest, all pride, vain-glory, and love of luxury, and gave herself, with a devotion worthy of a better cause, to the preservation of the Achæmenian line. Her paid agents in every city and province were busy in arming and encouraging all the known enemies of the Jews—and these were many. The king's second decree, these agents represented, was wrung from him by his queen, who was herself a Hebrew and doomed to perish miserably at the hands of those in high places, who

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deplored the mad infatuation of Xerxes, which was said to have become a dangerous obsession. The first decree, still immutable and binding upon all loyal subjects of the crown, must be obeyed; and this view of the case was found to gain ready acceptance in the minds of the many who feared and hated the Hebrew rule. So the months passed, and the dread thirteenth of Adar drew on apace, and as yet no one had discovered the steady stream of gold passing out from the hands of Atossa to the furtherance of her ends, nor the slow gathering of a second storm below the horizon.

In the late autumn the court was removed to Babylon for the winter months; but Atossa chose to remain behind, pleading her advanced age and her dread of the journey. The king, not altogether grieved by this decision, and choosing to believe her alleged reasons, paid his mother a visit of ceremony before departing for the far south.

He found her plainly robed, propped up by purple cushions, and looking frail and old. She gave him her white, fragile fingers with a smile.

"You find your aged mother supporting the growing infirmities of her years with such fortitude as becomes a daughter of Cyrus, who ever scorned the disabilities of the body to revel in the pleasures of the mind," she said, with a well-assumed languor.

Xerxes was touched by the look of real affection in her eyes.

"I would that you might journey with us, my mother," he said. "Our happiness will be incomplete without your presence."

"Right glad am I to hear you say so, my son," said Atossa, with sad dignity. "I have felt at times like the wraith of another age, as I beheld you happy and forgetful of the cares of state with your queen."

"I am able to forget care for a little time, because at last I have found a minister whom I can fully trust," said

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Xerxes. "Do not, I pray you, grudge me a little happiness."

"The happiness of a king should consist in nothing personal, but rather in seeking after the best interests of his kingdom."

"This I have done, my mother, in appointing Matacas to the post of chief counselor. He is most efficient, and endowed with the spirit of wisdom above all men."

"So thought you of Haman," retorted the old queen. "And now Haman is dead, and all his brood. How can you be sure of the Hebrew?"

The king's head dropped upon his breast.

"There is nothing certain in this world, save death," he said, in his former tones of melancholy and despair. "So sure am I of eternal sleep that already my tomb is prepared in the Double Mountain, beside that of my father. But next to death itself I would trust Matacas."

Atossa's blue eyes flew wide with ready suspicion.

"Your queen," she said; "has she again deceived you?"

"Not so. My Esther is as guileless as she has ever been. Always she longed to open to me her heart, but Matacas deemed it unwise."

"Matacas was entirely right," muttered Atossa.

After a little silence she spoke again.

"You should name the succession, if you have not already done so, my son."

The king looked troubled.

"The matter has been often in my mind of late," he said; "but I cannot choose between my sons. No one of them is fit to rule the kingdom; and I fear—I fear——"

"Darius is oldest of the three, and named for the great king, your father. What shall prevent him from the succession?"

Atossa spoke sharply, and the king drew his black brows together in perplexed thought.

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"Darius is, as you say, the first-born; but he is of a weak, indolent nature, like his mother. Now that he has married the daughter of Meres he appears to have given himself up to all follies and excesses. I doubt not the woman has driven him to it."

"So, being woman driven, he may not rule?" sneered Atossa, for the moment forgetting her rôle of semi-invalidism and extreme old age.

The king darted an angry look at her.

"Being little better than a tool of Meres, Darius shall not wear my crown," he said firmly. "I have watched him, tested him; he has failed each time. He can never be king by word of my mouth."

"What of Hystaspes, your second son?" asked Atossa. She had again closed her eyes, and lay the image of reverend and wise old age.

The king smote his knee with his broad palm.

"Hystaspes is also unfit," he said. "He has exceeded his authority as Satrap of Bactria in many ways, and his affairs are in continual confusion. Twice have I sent a commission to arrange matters pertaining to the government; and again is revolt threatened by the Bactrians, because of the follies and abuses emanating from my son. Could Hystaspes long retain the double crown of Persia and Media, think you?"

"Hystaspes is also the son of his mother, and she is a fool," murmured Atossa. "A man should look well to himself when selecting the mother of his sons."

"You chose Amestris for my queen," he reminded her. He was growing weary of the protracted interview. His look and gesture warned Atossa of this.

"Do not leave me yet," she entreated, laying her thin hand upon his arm. "Not often do I have the opportunity of speaking thus quietly with you, my son. And you are about to leave me. Perchance ere you return I shall be

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called to join your father, and my poor body laid in the niche reserved for me at his side in the closed tomb of the Double Mountain. The matter of the succession troubles me. What of Artaxerxes?"

"Artaxerxes!" exclaimed the king. And he laughed bitterly. "Artaxerxes is but a petulant child. But this morning he played at ball in the palace garden; presently the ball was lost among the shrubs and he ordered his slaves to fetch it; and when they could not at once find it, he commanded them to kneel before him while he punished each of them by thrusting his toy dagger into the palm of the right hand."

"'Twas the act of a future monarch," said the boy's grandmother proudly. "Name Artaxerxes, I entreat you. Such a lad will grow into the firm and resolute ruler, whose subjects will yield him unquestioning obedience."

Again the king's brow was overcast.

"I will not name Artaxerxes," he said. "The time calls not for cruelty and tyranny; but for justice, tempered with mercy; for wise and good laws, equably administered; for a firm yet loving rule. I see this now; and I perceive that I have failed miserably in governing my kingdom as I ought. I have thought too often of my own pleasure and convenience and too little of my people. Nay; the king has yet to be born who will rule his people in perfect equity."

"Think you that this just king will be of the Hebrew race?" inquired Atossa, with careful control of her features and eyes.

The king appeared lost in the contemplation of some inward vision. He raised his eyes slowly.

"The king who shall rule the whole earth in perfect justice, yet with love and mercy, will be of the Hebrew race," he said slowly; "for this have the sages and prophets revealed."

"What sages and what prophets, my son, have so revealed the future?" asked Atossa, still preserving every ap-

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pearance of patient mildness and gentle sincerity, albeit with difficulty unguessed by the king.

"The sages and prophets of the Hebrew race," replied the unsuspecting king. "I have read them much of late in my hours of leisure, and the reign of such a king is plainly foretold. Why should this perfect one not appear in my kingdom, and as a scion of my line?"

"Why, indeed?" echoed Atossa, clenching her thin hands beneath the coverlid, in her efforts to control her growing indignation. "You have a Hebrew wife. Shortly you are to have a Hebrew son, I am told. And perchance this son will sit upon your throne, and administer this perfect justice. Is it of this you are dreaming, my Xerxes?"

"I will not deny that I have thought of it," acknowledged the king, his eyes still fixed and thoughtful. "And why should it not be so? A perfect king, ruling over my vast kingdom! Ay, I would it might be so!"

Atossa bit her tongue in her efforts to preserve silence.

"Go, my son," she said at last, in a shaken voice. "Doubt not that your wondrous ambitions are nursed by the gods, who ever guard the affairs of nations with a jealous eye. I shall not live to see a Hebrew king upon the Achæmenian throne. But if the day arrives doubt not that my spirit will be with you."

The king, much moved by these words, which he interpreted to suit the tenor of his own thoughts, bent and kissed his mother upon the forehead, a mark of affection most unusual with him.

"Fare thee well, my mother," he said. "I have left my own physician to guard your health, and the wise Matacas will also remain behind to administer the affairs of the palace."

"Matacas remains?" exclaimed the old queen. "I was told that he journeyed with you to Babylon."

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“He will indeed journey with us,” the king said; “but he will return anon. To him you may safely entrust all matters which I would care for in your behalf were I to remain here.”

Again he caressed her, with the gentleness love had taught him, and left her to her malevolent imaginings.





XXXVIII



HE winter months passed quickly in the balm of the southern capital. In Babylon, that great city whose solidly built walls inclosed an area of not less than two hundred square miles, were to be found all imaginable diversifications and occupations. There were few

if any crowded streets, except those bordering on the banks of the Euphrates, which flowed through the midst of the city, dividing it in effect into twin cities within a single wall and further united by a system of drawbridges, used by day only, and drawn up during the night. These bridges, swung between massive piers of stone, were further supplemented for the convenience of the inhabitants by a tunnel dug beneath the bed of the river, and solidly constructed from closely joined blocks of stone clamped with bands of lead and iron. There were innumerable boats, also, and many paved landing places descending to the margin of the river.

“The city of a hundred gates” merited its name, for each of its double walls was pierced by twenty-five gates,

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each gate giving entrance to a broad, paved street which crossed the inclosed area to find exit through another gate in the opposite wall, thus forming a mathematically correct checkerboard of regular blocks. On the east side of the city were the houses of the poorer inhabitants, built of sun-dried brick, and densely crowded near the river; but in the western section were lofty villas, three and even four stories in height, surrounded by gardens, orchards and fields where vegetables and grains were grown. It was the boast of the builders of Babylon that its inhabitants in time of siege could grow food sufficient for their own consumption, were the siege prolonged to months and even years; while the Euphrates was thought to furnish a never-failing supply of water. Yet on a night when Belshazzar and his nobles feasted in arrogant security, the Persian Cyrus had entered the city by way of the river bed, and having diverted the water into other channels, had fallen upon the drunken revelers in their palace. The mysterious hand had written doom against Babylon, and Babylon the Great had fallen.

Yet in Babylon, the city which was once the delight of Nabopolassar and the wonder of nations, still remained the great palace, called by the Babylonians *Tapratinisi*, "the Marvel of Mankind," with its many chambers, its lofty towers, its high place of royalty, and its wondrous hanging gardens. And here the Queen of Xerxes passed many peaceful days, amid such delights and festivities as the greatest of monarchs could devise for the pleasure of the one woman he loved. From the windows of her chamber in the gorgeous palace of the Babylonian kings, Esther could see the seven stages of the tower of Belus, from whence Cyrus had torn the golden images of Beltis and Bel in the year of his conquest.

Xerxes was minded to rase the tower, also, to the earth, being a hater of images and image worship; but because his queen fancied the seven colors of the stages upon the summit

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of which the shrine stood—colors which rivaled the glory of the sunrise, ranging from the golden yellow of the sun to the pale silver hue of the moon—he allowed it to stand.

From the apex of the hanging gardens, which the king Nabonidus had caused to be built for his queen Semiramis, Esther could look away over the great city of her birth, catching the broad sheen of the river where the Hebrews had once sat them down to weep and lament their captivity. On the right was the great temple; to the left the tower of black marble, where Daniel, the prophet, had dwelt in his later days; and beyond clustered the many houses, palaces, and shrines, to the mighty double wall, studded at regular intervals with massive towers of defense, which had yet failed to preserve the city and the kingdom when its hour of doom had struck.

The queen was reposing in one of the stately apartments of the garden, open on its eastward side to the many-hued panorama of the ancient city. On its terraced platform, curiously built upon tiers of open arches like the walls of a classic theater, great trees stood motionless against the intense blue of the sky, and dazzling masses of roses, pink, yellow, and white, clustered at the bases of the strange statues symbolizing the seven days and the seven sacred planets. She was thinking dreamily of the past years of her life, begun in humility and sorrow in this very city, and now expanded into the splendid flower of royalty. Mordecai had already returned to Shushan, but his parting words remained with the queen, ever recurring like a minor strain of music.

“You are happy, my Hadassah,” he said, speaking in the Hebrew tongue, as was his wont when greatly moved; “but forget not that all mercy cometh from God. It is he who hath cut off the froward Haman from before thy path. Once again have I seen the wicked in great power; yea, spreading himself like a green bay tree. But he passed away; he is

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not. Yea, if one seek for him, he shall not be found! But the salvation of the righteous is of the Lord. He is our strength in time of trouble; and not the less, my Hadassah, in the days of prosperity. Cease not to pray to Jehovah night and morning, at noonday, also, as thou didst in the hour of thy terror. For he who forgets God in the midst of prosperity is even as one who has gained a single victory over a crafty enemy. He sleeps; he lies down; he arises to feast, saying, 'Mine enemy is dead; therefore I may forget the God who delivered me. I may altogether give myself to revelry and rejoicing.' Then, in an hour when he thinks not, the enemy falls upon that man and utterly destroys him. Forget not that Jehovah is the fortress of your salvation, my child, the sole shield of your life and honor; for in the day and hour of your forgetfulness, disaster will come upon you as an armed man. Pray, therefore, lest you forget; and I, also, will pray for you."

Remembering these solemn words of warning, Esther's lips moved in prayer; while on the terrace without her maidens laughed merrily, the sound of their sweet young voices mingling pleasantly with the splash of many fountains and the strains of distant music from the palace below.

Little by little, as she mused thus, praying at intervals in the measured cadences to which her child lips had become wonted, the rich paintings and tapestries of the walls appeared to grow dim, dissolving into parti-colored mists like the clouds which herald the rising of the sun. And as the mists wavered and rose in blinding folds, rose-tinted, golden, amethystine, Esther seemed to herself to arise from her couch and walk toward them. And as she went, the carven and colored walls of the palace still further receded before her—grew dimmer, disappeared; and at once she found herself in the street of a strange city, walking amid crowds of hurrying people, but quite unafraid. She came presently to a closed house, and went in. How, she knew not, save

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that she passed into a room where sat two men counting gold. Neither of the men looked up, nor paid any heed to the queen standing in the midst of the room in her rich, trailing robes and with the glimmer of jewels on her breast, and presently, being impelled by some strange influence which she did not pause to consider, she came close and looked narrowly at what she saw.

One of the men was old and ugly. He wore the Persian dress, and had his kitaris, or Median cap, pulled low upon his wrinkled forehead. He it was who counted the gold. Esther looked and beheld the money, that it was all in coins of an equal size, each coin bearing the head and superscription of Darius, King of Persia. These coins the man on the opposite side of the table received, muttering to himself as he did so. Then, for the first time, the queen observed further the queer, shrunken figure of a scribe, who squatted cross-legged between the two, writing upon a parchment the figures representing the piles of gold darics.

“It is not enough,” said the man dressed in the leathern jerkin and striped woolen tunic of the Berbers. “I must have more.”

“It is enough; and if you will not do the queen’s work for the contents of this bag, I must give it to another.” The Persian also added a foul oath to these words, and Esther would have turned to go away, being afraid of the dreadful faces of the men, and of the dwarf, who wrote busily on his knees, with swift strokes of his pen; but that something held her riveted to her place in the room.

“There are not above five hundred Jews in this city, I tell you, and at a daric a head——”

“But you insist that the heads be delivered for counting, my Prexaspes. Surely it is worth more if the heads be demanded. Consider, I pray you, the difficulty of securing the head in each instance, and also——”

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"The great queen will hear of no other arrangement being made," said the Persian coldly. "The heads must be counted before me or the one whom I shall appoint, in this city, and not later than sunset of the fourteenth of Adar. But hold! I have not told you all. When I have counted, if I find the full tale of five hundred— Is it five hundred, or more, Arbaces?"

"Five hundred forty and three is the number of Hebrews to be found in Bactra," croaked the dwarf. "This also includes their women, who are many, both old and young, and children and infants. You said to count them all."

"You are right, Arbaces; not even an infant of days shall be spared to wail for its mother; and their heads will be paid for at the specified rate. Five hundred forty and three, and you will receive in addition, at the time of the counting on the evening of the fourteenth of Adar—mind, I say in addition to this which I am now giving you—a further sum of one hundred gold darics!"

The Berber mumbled something in his beard, wagging his wicked head as he did so.

"By Ahriman, man! is not that a royal bounty? The great queen, I tell you, will pay it in gold—like this—yellow, solid gold, with the image of Darius—may the gods preserve his bones from decay—who kept the Persian kingdom intact to hand down to his son, who is little more than a fool. Curse him!"

"Make it one hundred and fifty darics, and I will consent to collect the heads," muttered the Berber. "Not for a daric less will I undertake it."

The Persian swore with a great oath that not one of a hundred and twenty and seven men, in a like number of provinces, had so robbed his queen. But he nevertheless struck his hand upon the table so that the darics chinked and rang, as he said that he would even accede to so evil an extortion.

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Whereupon the dwarf wrote busily upon his parchment, and the Berber began to gather up the money into a great pouch, still muttering and mouthing in his tangled beard. Then little by little the two men—whose faces and the fashion of whose dress even Esther had observed minutely—began to grow dim and shadowy. Last of all she saw the dwarf squatted cross-legged and writing upon the square of parchment upon his knee.

“Five hundred forty and three,” he was muttering, “including women and children.”

Then his ugly, hunched figure also grew dim and far away, and the roseate mists swallowed it.

When Esther opened her eyes it was to behold Abihail, who at the queen’s request had been restored to her position as chief tire-woman.

“May it please the Queen’s Majesty,” said the woman, a smile irradiating her round, wrinkled face, “to arise and be tired for the evening meal? It would never do to keep the great king, who rules the earth, waiting for his food. Now would it, my lamb?”

The excellent Abihail combined a sincere respect for royalty with a homely fondness for her queenly mistress which pleased Esther, but enraged her fellow servants, who could not understand the queen’s partiality for the old Hebrew woman.

Esther gazed fixedly at the kind face bent toward her. “I have had such a terrible dream,” she said. “Nay, it was more than a dream—it was a vision. God grant it be a shadow of the past, rather than a mirror of the future.”

“Tell it to me; then it will pass from your mind,” advised the old woman, as she assisted the queen to arise. “Dreams are like the mists of morning,” she added briskly. “The wind blows on them, and they vanish away.”

But the queen answered not. At the evening banquet of state, where her place was beside that of Xerxes, she

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spoke little, so that after a time the king observed it, and demanded the cause of her pallid looks and heavy eyes.

"It grows over warm in Babylon," quoth the king, "and the days of the great heat are not far away. To-morrow, which is the first of Adar, we shall again journey toward Shushan. There the cool breezes from the mountains will revive you."

But at the mention of the month Adar, the queen grew yet more ghastly pale.

"Tell me," she said with difficulty, "will there be much of bloodshed and tumult in the cities and provinces on that day—the thirteenth of Adar? I—I am afraid for my people."

"Have I not commanded my governors and my rulers to defend the Hebrews in every city and province? And think you that these will dare to disobey me?" asked the king, grieved by the sad countenance of the woman he loved. "Nay, my Esther; think no more of the thirteenth of Adar, save that on that day my daughter will be wedded to the Prince of Edom. This you may think of as often as you will, for verily I believe the stars will unite to shed luster on their nuptials."

The queen smiled, for she was glad of the good fortune of her kinsman, Nathan; and glad also that at last he seemed happy in the love of the Princess Amytis, who grew more radiantly lovely with every passing day which brought her espousals nearer.

But that night, as she lay in her great bedchamber in Babylon, she again dreamed of the man with the red Median cap pulled low upon his forehead, and of the ugly, squatting dwarf who wrote upon his knees. Only he who received the gold, which the man named Prexaspes counted out to him, was of a different fashion of countenance and dress from the Berber she had seen in her vision of the afternoon; and the tally of Hebrew heads demanded was also different,

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being foreshore and eleven. And so the dwarf wrote it upon his parchment. As before, the queen beheld the figure of the dwarf last of all, writing, writing; and this time he laughed, showing long, yellow fangs in his ugly mouth. This the queen saw on the night before the first day of the twelfth month, which is Adar.

And on that day the court again journeyed toward Shushan, and during the days and nights of its slow progress the queen dreamed no dreams. But at Shushan, it being the sixth of Adar, and the date fixed by the first edict being only seven days off, she dreamed of the Persian and his dwarfish scribe. But this time the dream was again different, in that the Persian said to the man who sat opposite counting the gold:

“All is now finished. Read, Arbaces.”

And Arbaces read from the sheaf of parchments spread upon his knees the names of many cities. And as he read, the queen saw his lips moving, but heard not his words; but she beheld a great flock of vultures fly up from the page—one great vulture and twelve young ones for each city. And the room became filled with the birds of ill omen, so that the noisy beating of their wings drowned the voice of the dwarf. And they crowded about the queen, almost suffocating her with their foul plumage. Then the figures of the two men became confused, and presently vanished quite away, leaving the dwarf only, who continued to liberate the loathly birds of death from the sheaf of parchments on his knee.

The queen awoke with a great cry, and her woman hurried to her, thinking her time was come. But she said to them:

“Go, call my kinsman, Matacas; for I must speak to him.”

Matacas came presently, and the queen told him straightway of her three visions. And she wrung her hands as she

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said: "These dreams of mine portend some evil; and of this I am assured, even though the king bids me think nothing of the thirteenth day, which is now close at hand."

Mordecai, the wise Hebrew, spoke not at first, for he was thinking of a day when he had seen a man with a red Median cap drawn low on his forehead coming out of the house of Queen Atossa. The old queen had remained quietly at Shushan all through the long months of the court's absence. Once only had the new chief counselor seen her, and then at the queen's request. She had sent for him, she declared, to make some provision for the disposition of her wealth. "For," said the aged widow of Darius, "I am now near to death, and my infirmities increase daily. Soon my intellect will totter on its throne, and I shall be ready to lie down for my eternal sleep. But first I would make sure that the three princes, sons of Xerxes, receive all that I have."

She had talked long with Matacas that day, and he had gone away impressed with the change which had taken place in the disposition of the queen, which indeed appeared to have grown strangely gentle and kind in these, her last days.

Yet he had seen such a man as Esther described coming out from the palace of Atossa. And he also remembered, as he mused upon the happening, that he had once seen the man in the train of Haman, the dead Amalekite. But his name he knew not.

To Queen Esther he said: "I doubt not there is much mischief intended against the Jews in many places; and this in spite of the king's letter, which long ere this has been promulgated in every city and province of the kingdom. But the Jews have the king's leave to fight for their defense; they have also the protection of all governors, rulers of cities, and satraps. In Shushan, both in the palace and the city, there will be no disturbance whatever; of this I am confident, not only because of the king's expressed wish and

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because of my presence, but also because on that day the daughter of Xerxes will wed a Hebrew. This circumstance alone will insure a day of joy, gladness, and feasting."

But Esther besought him with tears to warn all Hebrews of danger.

"Tell them," she implored, "to keep safe within their houses on that day, with barred doors and close-shuttered windows. Bid them keep the children from the streets, and let not the women show themselves at the windows nor on the roofs. And let no Hebrew in the palace or in the city do any business on that day, from the rising up of the sun until the going down of it. Let it be a day of fasting and prayer, rather than a day of feasting. And let every man have his weapon in his hand."

Mordecai listened to the queen with grave attention. Her excessive anxiety, he thought, was natural. But he called her attention to the fact that on the day of the marriage of two such notable personages as the Princess Amytis and the Prince of Edom, already named Satrap of Cyprus and endowed with great estates, it would be impossible to enforce a day of fasting; inasmuch as such a course would be deemed a marked affront to the king, who had ordered otherwise, and to Nathan, the future husband of the king's daughter and himself a Hebrew.

"You are overwrought, my Hadassah," he said soothingly, "by the long strain of days past, which at the time irked you not; but now by reason of memory and imagination it is present with you, pictured forth in these harmless shadows of the night. Be calm, I entreat you, and trust all to the king's goodness and my prudence."

He was astonished and even displeased when the young queen continued to weep and entreat him to warn the Jews far and near of impending disaster.

"Even yet I see the vultures," she wailed, "and hear the clamor of their wings. And the man, Prexaspes—nay,

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I cannot forget the evil of his visage as he counted the gold."

On that same day, at evening, was born the fourth son of Xerxes. And the young queen, his mother, as she lay, her son at her breast, forgot all evil dreams and portents in the joy of her heart. Without, in the city, she could hear the sounds of rejoicing and of music and the shouts of the feasting multitudes; for Xerxes the king had ordered great largesse of food and money given to the people in honor of the birth of the young prince, whom he at once named to the succession. And this he did despite the advice of Mordecai, and in defiance of the seven hereditary princes, who by this act of the king's became the open enemies of the new dynasty which they foresaw upon the Achæmenian throne.





XXXIX



LOWERY Adar had decked the vast plains of Shushan with largesse of blossom and lush grasses. On the banks of the river and by the marge of every smallest rivulet, fresh young leaves trembled in the spring winds. Birds were nesting in the thickets, and flitting beneath the blue sky softly dappled with white clouds, like huddled flocks of tender lambs. At evening of the twelfth day the first rose unfolded in the garden of the king's palace, and above it, hid in the tumultuous blossoms of a purple rhododendron, the earliest nightingale poured forth the joy of his swift homeward flight from the southland; while beside him his mate rested, her dusk bosom palpitating, mother-wise, to the ecstasy of his song.

It was a night when every breeze swelled with the joyous murmurs of youth and love and the cool fragrance of the opening year. The Princess Amytis, freshly robed in garments of white, seemed a blithe spirit of the spring, as she fluttered, light as the breeze itself, adown the broad grav-

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eled path to meet the man she loved. On this, the last night of her maiden life, she was happy with that deeper happiness which depends not upon outward circumstance but wells up within the soul, a tide of joy—the joy of that perfect love which brooks not fear nor any foreboding of evil.

The dark face of Nathan brightened as he saw her coming to him amid the young leaves and the freshly fragrant flowers of early spring. During the weeks and months that had passed, the deep wound in his soul had healed somewhat; the hurt of it was less poignant, more easily borne, even during those hours of solitude when once he had wished only for the dreamless sleep that knows no waking. Some natures love deeply but once; others many times. Nathan, Prince of Edom, could never again pour out his soul in the unconscious poetry which ever springs unbidden to the lips of his race; yet was he deeply grateful to Amytis for the unstinted treasure she offered for his acceptance, and this gratitude was so closely akin to love, so exquisitely tender in its expression, that the maiden was satisfied, scarce thinking of the sealed fountains of his being which her tender fingers had not strength to liberate.

When yet she was a little way off, she paused, all her adoring soul in her eyes. And the prince, in the dark splendor of his young manhood, came swiftly to meet her, drawn by the exquisite timidity of the young maiden who was not yet a wife, but whose bridal day was so soon to dawn.

Still her eyes drew him, and before he well realized it he had taken her in his arms, and for the first time his lips met hers. Many times he had caressed her fingers with the light touch of the courtier; and once, on the day of their betrothal, he had set a single kiss upon her forehead, which ever since she had felt there more real than any crown.

“My Amytis!” he murmured.

She smiled divinely, but with silent lips, as if his kiss had sealed them against the commoner uses of speech.

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And her silence charmed him more than speech, in that it beguiled him, as words could not, into further expressions of tenderness—this new tenderness which comforted the hurts of his youth, while it promised a more tranquil happiness than he had yet known.

“To-morrow, sweet Princess, at this hour you will be mine,” he murmured, and again his lips sought hers.

“Ah, you do love me, after all,” she whispered, hiding her dazzled face against his breast.

His eyes clouded as he looked down at the golden head resting where once the lovely, dark face of Esther had lain for an instant. But he answered steadily:

“I do love you, Amytis. I should be less than man if I could hold you in my arms unmoved. And to-morrow——”

He stopped short as he remembered why he had refused to celebrate their marriage before sunset of the thirteenth of Adar. He had feared that, notwithstanding the second edict, some mischief might befall Esther on that day, and he had resolved to spend it armed before the door of her palace, ready to challenge and cut down any intruder. He smiled faintly, as he thought how unnecessary was any weak defense of his for the adored queen of the great Xerxes, the mother of the future king of Persia, in her doubly guarded palace.

“To-morrow,” repeated Amytis timidly, “at this hour we shall have departed upon our long journey. No one will ever separate us again if you love me. Is it not so?”

He smiled down at her, while the nightingale’s thrilling song filled the night with sweetness.

“Nay, what could separate us after we are once wedded, my Amytis?” he asked, with exceeding gentleness. After a little he said firmly, “Know now and for all time that I shall not imitate foreign princes—nor indeed the princes of my own race—by taking other wives. You are the one and

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only woman I shall ever wed. Does this satisfy you, sweet?"

"I think it would break my heart were it to be otherwise," she stammered. "Nay, I could not bear——"

"Think not of it any more," he interrupted her. "Even could you endure the thought of it, I could not. We will set an example of perfect wedded love and happiness, my Princess, which our subjects may well wish to emulate. It shall be one of the objects of our reign in Cyprus to introduce and encourage those higher ideals of life and its conduct which we both desire for ourselves."

His eyes kindled, and he held the daughter of the great Xerxes close, as his thoughts dwelt with a noble ambition he had supposed forever perished on the future—their future—in the far country over which he would be in effect king.

They two could do much for their time, he knew; and a tranquil tide of happiness flowed in upon his soul in a flood of good and peaceful thoughts, as he dreamily pictured their life in the little island palace, far removed from the fevered struggles and intrigues of the royal court.

"Let us talk," she said at length, "of to-morrow. At dawn—or before—when the earliest birds begin to twitter about the eaves of my chamber, I shall awake and think of you."

"And I," he murmured, with a smile, "shall remember that at last the day has come."

She blushed and sighed vaguely, while her eyes timidly sought his.

"There will be many tedious ceremonials," she said, "and a toilet—nay, I wish I might not waste so many hours of to-morrow in the hands of my tire-women."

"Why not please yourself to-morrow of all days, my bride?" he asked, his strong fingers closing upon hers.

"Why not, indeed?" she echoed, with a flash of her old

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petulance. "You will love me quite as much if I have not passed long, wearisome hours in the hands of the many women Hegé has set apart for the service of the royal wife-to-be."

She blushed enchantingly as she said this, and Nathan gazed at her with unconcealed admiration.

"You are already so beautiful that nothing could add to your charm," he said, with an air of honest conviction which caused the princess a thrill of keenest happiness.

She laughed aloud, and the nightingale who had paused in his song to dream of nest building on the morrow, burst into a single ecstatic trill.

"Let me think how to escape them all," she murmured, one finger on her rosy lips. "Could you meet me an hour after the sun rises? I will say to my women that I must needs supplicate the goddess Armaiti for our wedded happiness. They will not venture to interfere betwixt me and the goddess, and then I will come, clad as you see me in a simple robe of white, and we two will spend the golden time together till the hour has struck for the procession and the sacrifice. Then we will go at once to the great audience chamber, and——"

She stopped short to look up at the prince. His features were stern and cold; his eyes blazed with a strange, solemn light.

"What," she faltered, "have I—said? Is it wrong, then, for me to wish to be with you—on the morrow?"

He reassured her with a caress.

"Not so, my Amytis; it is most right and loving and true, and I will not fail you. But as you spoke of the morrow—I know not why—my wayward thoughts carried me far from our happiness, so soon to dawn with the morning light; and I saw my brethren, but lately doomed to death, and now permitted by the grace of the king to defend themselves against their enemies. And I wished that

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we were to wed on another day—nay, that we were already wed!”

He spoke with a recurrence of the passionate melancholy which she had hoped was forever exorcised, but his final words reassured her.

“I would not have put off our bridal so long,” she said, with a sparkle of mischief under her downcast lids, “but you——”

“I know!” he acknowledged. “I did not at first wish to marry soon. I may confess this to you now, my Princess, when I await the morrow with scant patience. And you will forgive me, will you not?”

“Forgive you?” she echoed. “Nay, I am glad—too glad to harbor any regrets for the past or fears for the future.”

And so the supreme hour of their happiness, which had been long in coming, passed amid the shadows of the flowery garden. And after a little the moon arose to pour a flood of silver light upon them, and the nightingale sang ever more sweetly of love, and the wind sighed, as if loath to hasten the charmed moments which fled past into the soft dusk of the night.





XL



WITH the earliest twitter of half-awakened birds the great privy counselor, Matacas—who had received the further title of Prince of Parthia and Hariva, together with the grant of all the vast estates of the now extinct family of Haman—arose, and as was his custom, went up to the roof of his palace to commune with his God, in the cool of the early day.

The sky was flushed with rosy light, which palpitated beneath light diaphanous cloud like the pure flesh of a beautiful maid under a misty garment of white. Far to the east, whence the ineffable glory emanated as from a heart of fire, the mountains stood transfigured, and nearer at hand on the broad plains—where the winding course of the river could be dimly traced by the lingering mists of the vanished darkness—a myriad of new flowers unfolded to the growing light; and above all moved the fresh, the singing winds of the morning.

The thirteenth of Adar had dawned at last.

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Mordecai, the Hebrew, stood still and gazed at the sunrise, as he had stood and gazed on many successive mornings, his face toward distant Jerusalem, his lips moving in the sonorous words of the Invocation to the Light:

Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe!
Who createst light and formest darkness!
In mercy thou causest the light to shine upon the earth
and the inhabitants thereof,
And in goodness renewest every day the work of creation!
Blessed art thou, Creator of Light!

As he repeated the words, a flood of devout gratitude welled up within his heart, and involuntarily his eyes, which had sought the radiant zenith of the heavens, dropped earthward to the city which lay at his feet. Yonder were the saved homes of the Jews, his brethren, gathered into a small area, like close friends. How fearful would have been the dawning of this day had not Jehovah intervened to save his people!

Then a spot of vivid scarlet drew the dreaming eye of the scribe to the great stair of the palace. The scarlet was the vesture of a dwarfish figure which toiled along at the heels of a man who wore a Median cap pulled low upon his forehead.

To behold a man, followed thus by his slave, ascending the staircase which led up to the palace, was in no wise remarkable. Yet the wise Mordecai scrutinized the figures with close attention. In some mysterious fashion they linked themselves with an uneasy train of thought in that deeper mind which thinks uninterruptedly, but whose conclusions and warnings are not always heeded. Desiring to know the man who sought the palace at so early an hour—though, indeed, all the world was waking now—Mordecai presently wrapped himself in a dark mantle, and hastening down from

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his roof, crossed by the elevated bridge which linked his own dwelling with that of the king, and so found himself on the great terrace ere the two figures in their toilsome ascent had gained the level of the platform.

As he approached the man with the dwarf panting at his heels, he noticed that the latter bore a roll of parchments, and carried at his girdle the inkhorn and a sheaf of the papyrus pens which marked the Egyptian scribe.

At the same instant the man halted, and addressed the cloaked figure of the counselor.

"I was told to meet a trusted servant of the great queen at this place and hour," he said. "Are you he?"

Mordecai bowed his head.

"I am ever ready to serve the great queen in word and deed," he responded. "Your name and business with me?"

The man hesitated.

"Surely you need not ask," he muttered, "if you are the queen's man."

"I wish merely to be certain that I speak to Prexaspes," said Mordecai, obeying a strange impulse.

The man laughed harshly.

"Tell me the name of my dwarf, also, and I shall be satisfied."

"His name," said Mordecai slowly, "is Arbaces; and he has the records and the requisitions."

"Yes, it is well; what said the queen as to the hour? All is ready; but the hour and the signal I am to learn from you."

"For——?"

"For the killing," quoth the man, with an impatient oath. "I have the heads to count in many cities; therefore let it be finished early. I must have the queen's, that of the prince, and the two pestilent Jews, Mordecai and Nathan,

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if I would win my guerdon. These must I show to the queen. For the others she will take my word, but these she must look upon with her own eyes."

Mordecai controlled himself with a terrible effort.

"The hour," he said, "will be that when Mithra stands overhead in midheaven. The queen wills it."

"What—not till noon? I had planned to strike off the crowns within the hour, and the others afterwards."

"Fool! You would die before you could cross the queen's threshold. All will be lost if you attend not to my orders."

"I am listening," said Prexaspes sullenly.

Mordecai looked sharply about, and saw at a little distance a second cloaked man approaching.

"You are to follow me—you and the dwarf," he said authoritatively. "I have written instructions for you, which you must follow to the letter, or die the death."

The King's Gate was close at hand, and the three men presently entered its portals. Within, already occupied with the day's business, sat several Hebrew scribes. Mordecai knew them all as trusted servants of his own. He beckoned to one, and the man instantly came forward.

"Seize and hold these two men," he whispered, "till I can call the guard. There is mischief afoot."

He grappled with the Amalekite as he spoke, and the man bursting into a bellow of fear and rage, drew a dagger with a sudden quick movement and lunged wildly at the breast of the scribe. No one troubled to look after the dwarf amidst the confusion and panic which followed, and when Prexaspes had finally been subdued and manacled, the Egyptian had vanished.

"He has slipped away—my little weazel!" raved the captive, glaring at the man who had tricked him. "And you—Hah! I know you now! Matacas, the Jew!"

He struggled violently with his bonds.

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“I could kill you with my hands!” he cried, as they bore him away.

But Mordecai was too intent upon the terrible crisis which was upon him, to pay further heed to Atossa's murderous tool. He knew now with a dreadful certainty that Esther's vision had been granted her in mercy, and that foolishly elate and content with his own unprecedented good fortune, he had quite failed in comprehending this. But there was still time. He might yet prevent the worst.

Within the hour, a double guard had been posted about the queen's palace, and the Hebrews in the palace and the town put under arms. Still there was no sign of any trouble; no token that anything save the great festival of the royal bridal was to take place. And Mordecai hesitated to inform the king.

Already the palace swarmed with men bearing green boughs and huge baskets of flowers. The procession and the sacrifice were not to take place till evening, but the preparations for the marriage were going forward with gay enthusiasm. Rich carpets were being spread upon marble terraces everywhere, and fresh draperies of the royal violet and white hung from silver rings with cords of twisted gold, transformed the somewhat cold and severe exterior of the Hall of Columns into the semblance of gala. Here, also, were banks of roses; and the great square pillars were wreathed from capital to base with flowery garlands, so that the heads of the carven bulls looked forth from a thicket of fresh leaves and blossoms. Everywhere was laughter and the sound of cheerful voices, and the clatter of utensils also from the underground kitchens, whence issued the odors of roasting and boiling, presaging the great banquet which was to be held in honor of the newly wedded pair.

After an hour spent in such precautions, and in the taking of such hasty measures as suggested themselves to him,

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Mordecai resolved to visit the man called Prexaspes. The captive had been manacled to a pillar in one of the guard rooms to the left of the King's Gate, and two soldiers of the king's guard set to watch him. But when Mordecai entered the place he found it ominously empty. Both the prisoner and the guard had disappeared.

This could signify nothing less terrifying than the disaffection of the guard itself. Mordecai stood still, his mind striving to grapple with the scant factors of the problem. Which of two guilty queens was concerned in the plot? If Amestris, he hoped that she might already be alarmed into abandoning it by the news of its discovery. But Atossa!

He resolved to visit the old queen in person. And heedless of any possible danger to himself he went alone and on foot to the palace, which among all the others showed no token of festal preparation.

Atossa received the Hebrew statesman with an air of suppressed excitement which he was not slow to interpret.

"I came," he said directly, "to ask you if you have seen the dwarf?"

"The dwarf?" she repeated, mincing her words, as she flashed a malevolent glance at her questioner. "What dwarf?"

"The servant of Prexaspes, who has just succeeded in escaping from me."

"Ah! he has escaped, then?"

"You have not seen him since?"

The old queen was silent. But Mordecai perceived that she trembled violently, while her eyes wandered toward the open windows. She appeared to be listening intently for some expected sound.

"Tell me," he said sternly, "what vile thing are you plotting? Already I know something of it; and I swear to you that I will cause you to be strangled within the hour

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if you do not at once take measures to stop the proceedings against——”

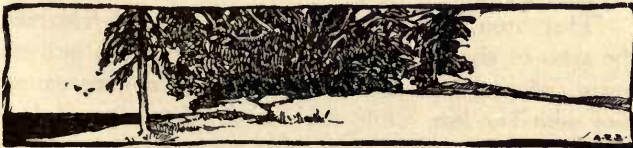
“Hist!” cried Atossa. Her head, with its slightly flattened forehead, appeared to vibrate like the crest of a venomous serpent in the instant before it strikes its poisoned fangs deep in the inert body of its chosen victim. There was a sound without, soft at first, but swelling into a deep-toned brazen clamor, which rose above the cheerful voices of the young workmen who were hanging rose garlands on the walls of the bride’s palace.

Mordecai smote his hands together with an involuntary groan. It was the great bronze disk of the shield of Armaiti which hung in the temple, and which the priests struck only when death visited the royal family. He had heard it on the midnight when Darius died, and once since on a day when an infant prince passed into the great silence.

Atossa had risen to her feet. Her ghastly face glowed with the light of hard-won triumph.

“Go!” she cried, “and drink the cup of woe which awaits you! The gods who have not ceased to watch over the Persian Empire have poured it for your blasphemous lips. You cannot escape!”

Mordecai rushed out to the great terrace, which, on a sudden, resounded with cries and curses and the sound of blows.





XLI



IN the morning of that day Esther, the queen, lay in her great bed of state. She had slept little during the night, and at daybreak she awoke from a troubled sleep to find Abihail standing over her, an anxious look on her round, wrinkled face.

“Ah, you are at last awake, dear queen and mistress,” murmured the old woman. “Half the night I have been watching you, and in your sleep you spoke twice, calling me loudly by name. But when I answered, you again slept.”

“Bring me my child,” said the young queen, raising herself on her pillows. “I wish to hold him close in my arms.”

They brought the prince, rosily asleep, and laid him in the arms of the queen, and she held him against her young breast, adoring him and like any humble mother caressing him with her lips, while she murmured sweet and foolish words above his downy head. And when presently his nurse, a dark, smooth-voiced Greek, came to take him away, the queen refused.

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“To-day,” she said, “I will myself care for my son. Not to any other will I surrender him till the going down of the sun.”

And so it was that when that great brazen clamor broke out from the shrine of Armaiti, the queen still held her babe close cradled in her arms.

On the instant, by some strange chance, it appeared, all the attendants and slaves disappeared from her chamber, leaving only the child's nurse and Hatach, the queen's eunuch. Abihail also remained, for at the moment she was putting on the queen's robe, and the three assisted her to the chair where she had chosen to sit.

Again the Greek offered to take the child, and again the queen refused.

“I must hold him,” she said, “in these arms during all the hours of this day. No other must so much as touch him.”

The Greek cast a barely perceptible glance at Hatach, the eunuch.

“Be it so,” he murmured, and he fetched a great breath, as though he carried in secret a heavy load.

By this the brazen clamor of the shield had quite died away along the corridors and terraces. Yet the queen had asked no question. Once more the Greek woman, whose eyes had begun to dart fires of impatience, approached the queen.

“Give me the child,” she said rudely. “I must do for him what you cannot do in your present weakness.”

Esther gazed intently at the woman.

“You can do nothing for my child that I cannot do,” she made answer. “And you mistake; I am not weak, but strong.”

The queen rose to her majestic height as she spoke these words and stood before them, shielding the tiny form of the prince with her two white arms.

THE STAR OF LOVE

"Go," she said to Abihail, with exceeding gentleness, "and make for me in the kitchen below one of those sweet possets, such as I used to drink when I was a child. Go, good Abihail, by the inner stairway."

And when the old Hebrew woman had departed with joyful haste, Esther fixed her clear eyes upon the man, who edged ever closer, with a frightened yet dogged look, and at the Greek woman, who watched them both with a murderous look of scorn.

"Why do you not make haste to do your work?" hissed the Greek. "I am waiting to do mine."

And she made a quick motion, as though she would snatch the child from the arms of his mother.

Hatach raised his miserable shamed eyes to the beautiful face of the queen, who returned the look with one of full understanding.

"Why do you wish to hurt me?" she asked quietly, "who have ever treated you with kindness? Do you not know that I am under the protection of Elohim, whose invisible shield is interposed between me and that dagger you carry concealed in your bosom?"

At this the man cried aloud, and covered his eyes from the white light of love and purity which appeared to stream forth from the queen's majestic figure, and to envelop it in blinding splendor.

"Fool and coward!" hissed the Greek. "You have been paid to do your work, and you are afraid! But I will do it, and kill you beside!"

She sprang at the queen like a fury incarnate, her full lips drawn back in a beastlike snarl.

But Hatach, as if suddenly galvanized into the likeness of a man, seized her by the hair and dragged her backward, shrieking and cursing. A single plunge of the eunuch's dagger silenced the woman. He drew forth the crimson blade and cast it at the feet of the queen.



“IT WAS A DAY OF DREADFUL DOOM IN THE CITY AND THE PALACE.”

THE STAR OF LOVE

“Take it,” he moaned, “and kill me, if you will! But I cannot. Hark! They will kill you yet! They are coming to see if I have done my horrid work! Quick, hide yourself behind the curtains of the bed! And I——”

He snatched the queen's purple mantle from her shoulders, and hastily covered the body of the dead Greek.

There was a sound of splintering wood, the crash of a fallen door, and the sharp ring of sword on sword in token of the frightful combat going on in the queen's antechamber.

“Quick!” panted the eunuch.

But Esther stood still, her sleeping child in her arms. In that supreme moment of peril her heart lifted itself once more to the King of kings, and she seemed to behold the extended scepter of his mercy in the single ray of golden light which reached down to her out of the heavens, penetrating a veiled opening in the ceiling of her chamber.

“Thou art my shield, O Lord,” she murmured, “and my exceeding strong defense!”

Then the curtains were dashed aside with a strong arm and Xerxes, the king, dripping sword in hand, sprang into the room.

“God!” he cried, “I am in time!”

He dropped to his knees, as if in adoration of the crowned and regnant-motherhood of the race, while the soldiers of his guard, who crowded at his side, drew back with awe.

It was a day of dreadful doom in the city and the palace, wherein death and revenge stalked forth unhindered to reap a red harvest. Long before evening all was over, and at sunset there was the sound of wailing in Shushan. Among the heaps of slain which lay in front of the queen's palace they found the bodies of Nathan and Amytis, who were to have been wed on that day. They were together, as they had planned, in the quiet recesses of the royal garden when that awful signal of death first broke upon the shuddering

THE STAR OF LOVE

air, and here Dinora, the Hebrew slave whom the Prince of Edom had rescued from the wrath of Hegé, and who since had remained in the service of Amytis, came in tremulous haste to tell them of the awful thing that was happening.

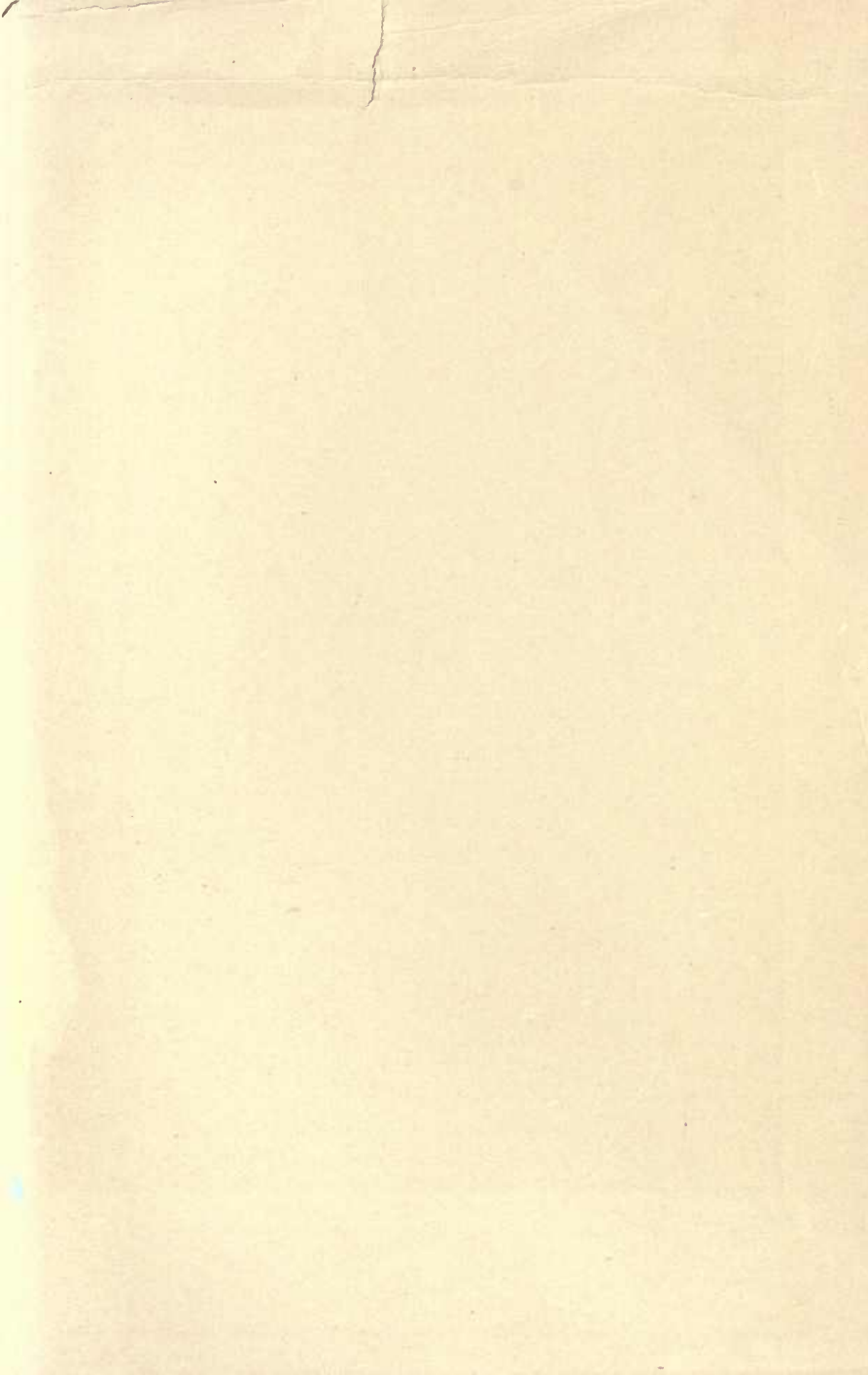
“The queen! the queen!” she gasped. “They will kill the queen!”

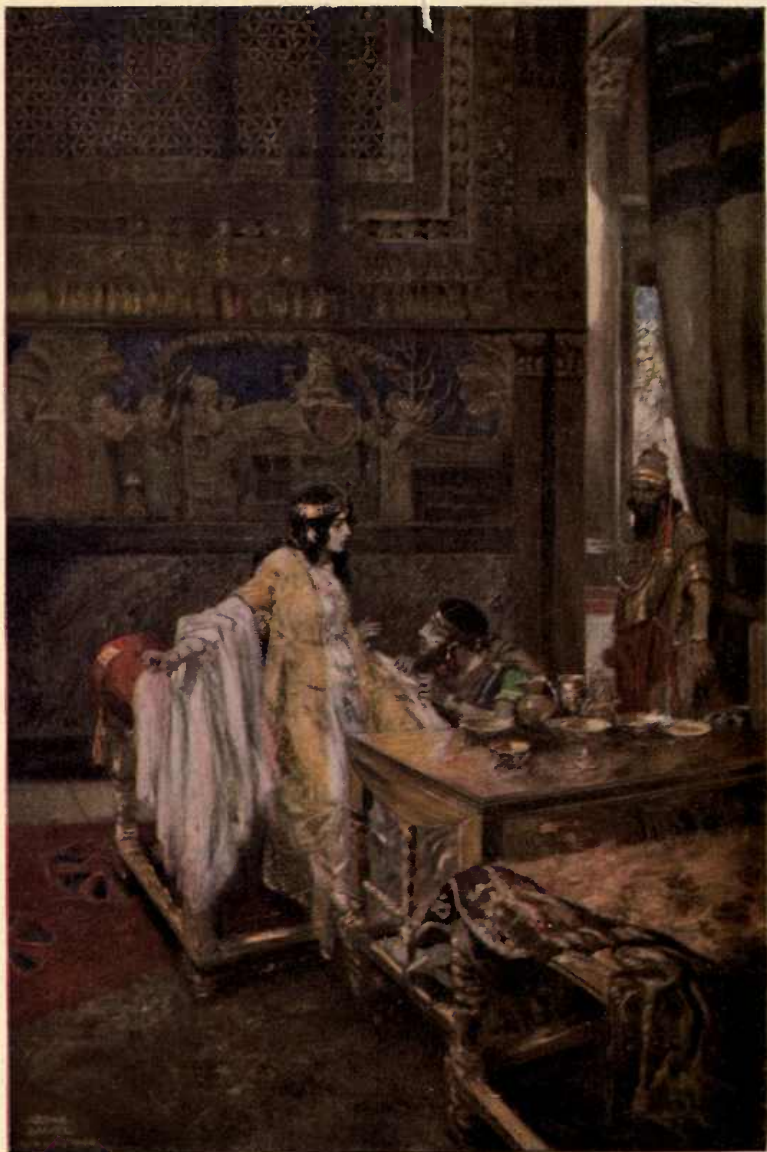
And so it was that Nathan fulfilled his vow to the Star of Love which he had made in the presence of Mordecai so long ago. For he rushed out on the instant, calling loudly for the king to follow; and in the moment of victory he had fallen on the threshold of the queen’s palace. He did not know in that mad rush to victory and death that the daughter of Xerxes had followed him quite to the verge of life—and past it. But who shall say that life and love are indissolubly linked with the body? Nay, rather, “There is no death; what seems so is transition.”

They had fared forth upon their long, long journey together, and no one asked that in their calm slumber they should be separated. At sunset, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is called Adar, they bore the royal lovers in solemn procession to the new tomb of Xerxes, which had been hewn out in the face of the Double Mountain. And there they left them, while the sacred fire burned in the soft dusk of the spring night, and the sound of solemn chanting was borne far on the wings of the mourning wind to die in soft cadences beneath the stars.

(1)

THE END





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