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A Romance of Babylon

BY

WALTER BLISS NEWGEON

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RHESA

CHAPTER I

THE WINGED LIONS

That part of modern Arabia now known as the Syrian desert is at the present day and has been through all ages a desolate, dreary, sandy waste, dreaded alike by the Arab and his faithful camel. The traveler who for the first time finds himself in the midst of this desolation, experiences much the same sensation as the landsman who, rising early upon his first day out from port, takes a promenade on deck. As the stranger on the ocean sees naught but water and sky with possibly a distant sail to break the monotony of the scene, so the traveler in the desert may look toward all the points of the compass and see naught but sand—sand everywhere. Could one stand upon a mountain top and look down upon this waste, he would imagine it to be a perfectly flat plain, but upon descending he would find that, like the prairies of our own land, it lay in ascending ridges resembling the long roll of the ocean upon a calm day. Occasional sand hills serve to break the monotony of the otherwise oppressive scene, but even they cannot be geographically located, since each storm sweeps them from place to place. Toward the north broken ranges of rocky hills mark the gradual evolution of the desert into a mountainous country, which continues to rise until reaching its greatest height in the Armenian mountains and the Caucasian range.

Little vegetation is found except in the occasional oases where a solitary group of palm trees rises from amidst a scanty

growth of underbrush to give welcome shade and rest to the weary traveler. Of animal inhabitants it has few; an occasional lion, a pack of jackals, or rarely a wild ass are the only living beings to be met. The traveler may ride for miles without meeting a sign of life, either animal or human, while the fierce Arabian sun beats down upon his head with unrelenting fury.

Toward the rising sun the desert, in former times, lost its arid character until, east of the Euphrates, it became a fertile plain, the seat of powerful empires. At the present day the sand has crossed the great river and the plain, once noted for its great productiveness, is hardly better than a desert. In ancient times a strip of fertile land, varying from twenty to thirty miles in width, intervened between the Euphrates and the sandy region.

Had a traveler stood upon this desert near its northern border late in the afternoon of a torrid June day, B. C. 539, taking in the scene about him, he would have seen naught but sand and sky in all directions save one. Had he attentively examined the northwestern horizon he would have observed a brownish cloud and beneath the cloud a small black spot. As he might have continued gazing, the cloud would have increased in size and density and the black spot enlarged until it changed from a single blot upon the horizon to a myriad of moving objects. As the moments sped by and the objects came nearer he would have perceived them to form a company of horsemen and the cloud to be a cloud of dust raised by the hoofs of the steeds composing the rapidly moving troop. Any inhabitant of the world of that day would have immediately recognized it as a body of Babylonian cavalry, a branch of that terrible army which made Babylon "the hammer of the whole earth."

The troop was composed of an hundred fighting men who rode horses, besides a retinue of fully forty servants, each of whom rode upon one mule and led another upon whose back a portion of the necessary supplies and equipments were packed.

These servants were of various nationalities, but the swarthy negro-like Susianians were the most numerous, while the Semitic features of Hebrews abounded. The mules allotted to this portion of the cavalcade were spirited and active animals, resembling those for which Khuzistan is famous at the present day.

The horsemen were a splendid body, the equal, if not the superior, of any similar body the world of that day contained. All the riders were young, richly uniformed, and mounted upon the finest specimens of horse-flesh to be found in all Chaldea.

The soldiers were short and broad-shouldered. Their heads were large and well-formed, the foreheads straight but not high, and the lips a trifle full. Each rider was the possessor of an abundant growth of hair, both upon the head and face. Their thick black locks flowed without restraint over their necks and shoulders, affording a fine protection from the sun's fierce rays. Nearly all wore beards which hung in crisp curls upon their breasts. Their dark complexions, their flattened noses, and their general physiognomy bespoke their ancient Cushite descent.

Of head-dress they had little, their thick black locks giving all the protection needed against the elements. A single fillet of linen cloth wound about their heads sufficed. Their general dress was elaborate. A long linen gown hung from the shoulders reaching nearly to the feet. This gown or tunic was covered by a short sleeveless coat, richly embroidered, which barely reached to the knees. It hung only from the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder and both arms entirely bare. The arms thus exposed were round and sinewy but greatly browned as a result of the outdoor life constantly led by the men. A low boot, in some cases made of linen, in others of goat skin, was worn. This boot was embroidered and laced up the front. The fillet of linen about the head and a broad leather belt encircling the body somewhat higher up than the waist, completed their clothing.

Their armor and weapons were crude but well adapted to the needs of their time and their methods of warfare. In front of each rider and attached to his saddle horn was a bronze helmet which was donned upon going into battle. Slung from the left shoulder by a leather strap was a thin metal shield, while from his neck was suspended a padded linen breastplate. Upon his back, a little to the right of the center, each man carried a quiver containing his arrows. A few of the soldiers carried long bronze-headed spears, the butt resting upon the foot and the point held aloft, after the fashion of the lances of knights of later days. The spear-carriers were few in number and were scattered throughout the command in such a manner as to suggest their being minor officers.

Slipped between his girdle and body, each man carried two short daggers encased in unornamented sheaths. A curiously shaped battle-axe completed the cumbrous armament each rider was obliged to carry. Despite this load the men seemed remarkably free from fatigue as they sat their horses well, their heads held high and their backs straight. The absence of prisoners, the apparent freshness of both horses and men, and the careless manner in which the arms were carried, indicated that the present errand was one of peace.

Thus mounted and equipped, and followed by its long contingent of servants and heavily laden mules, the cavalcade was an imposing one. An observer would experience no surprise that the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk termed them "terrible and dreadful." This branch of the army now introduced was one of the most famous bands of soldiery of the ancient world. Organized by the young prince Nebuchadnezzar as his own personal body-guard at the time his aged father sent him against the Egyptian king, Necho, it had continued in uninterrupted existence throughout the reigns of successive monarchs. It was now en route to the Golden City to play an important part in the coronation ceremonies of the boy Belshazzar, the last king of that great empire.

Although organized merely as the king's personal body-guard,

it had on several occasions been ordered into battle with such effect that it had been made a part of the regular army, and upon it devolved the hardest fighting of many bloody campaigns. Because of its fierce riding and desperate valor, the guard had been early christened the Winged Lions, a name that remained attached to it throughout all the years of its existence. To be an officer, or even a member of this famous troop was the highest ambition of the young Babylonian noble, and to be its commander was one of the highest honors within the gift of the king.

The present commander of the troop was a young man of striking personality. Mounted upon a horse of a much finer breed than those composing the body of the troop, and dressed in a much more elaborate manner, he showed himself plainly to be the ruling spirit of the Winged Lions. His body clothing consisted first, as did that of his men, of an inner garment, but his outer coat differed greatly. It reached to a little below the knees and was heavily fringed and handsomely embroidered. Unlike the coats of his men it had sleeves that reached to and fully covered the wrists. This coat was dyed a rich crimson and from sheer brilliancy alone would have drawn attention to its wearer. His richly embroidered boots reached to his knees, meeting the outer coat and thus leaving no portion of his person uncovered. His hair was not allowed to hang unrestrained, but was gathered in a single stiff curl at the back of his head. His cheeks and chin were covered by a well-kept black beard.

The girdle, instead of being a plain band of leather, was covered with a strip of linen cloth embroidered in gold. A broad cross-belt passed over his back and chest in a diagonal manner, serving to hold in place the quiver containing his arrows. Upon the front of this belt was much embroidery, mostly of a mythological character. Among the emblems was the mystic number assigned to the god Bel or Belus, thus denoting him the young chieftain's patron.

In his head-dress the usual linen fillet had been improved

upon, making a sort of stiff turban, covered with gorgeous devices and embroidered in gold. A golden bracelet upon the left wrist and a necklace of gold and pearls completed the leader's attire.

His armament was considerably lighter than that of his men. The customary linen breastplate hung from his neck, and as previously mentioned, a quiver of arrows was strapped to his back. Of armor he wore none, his helmet and shield being carried by a young man at his side, evidently his body-servant. His battle-axe was attached to his saddle.

The noble horse upon which the young man sat was a jet-black stallion of beautiful shape and graceful carriage. A single white star in the center of his forehead was the only exception to his prevailing color. The slender limbs, the shapely head, and the delicate, sensitive ears, signified an animal of the finest breed—a king of his race. Indeed he was one of that noble race for which Arabia has been noted throughout all ages. The intelligent beast seemed to realize the importance of the burden he carried. His shapely head was held high, his neck proudly arched, and at each step his delicate feet were raised in conscious pride.

The manly figure and bearing of the commander were such as to win for him the plaudits of a multitude. He was taller and of a slighter mould than his men; his features were finer; more Semitic and less of the Cushite. He resembled more the Hebrew than the Chaldean, his thick black hair and dark complexion alone expressing the type shown in his men. His face was the index of a noble soul and character. Such was Nabomuran, the commander of the Babylonian cavalry, a rank not far removed from that of King Nabonidos himself.

A word must be said for Nabomuran's companion and body-servant, who might well be termed a Babylonized Jew. A son of Judah he certainly was, but his dress and ornaments were essentially those of the Golden City, thus showing him to have forsaken to a certain degree the habits and customs of his forefathers, and to have adopted those of his captors.

That he was more than a mere servant to the captain was evidenced by the unrestrained conversation taking place between them as they rode along.

"Truly, O Heber, this Jerusalem of thine must have been a wonderful city," Nabomuran was saying.

"It was indeed," replied the Jew. "The city of Jehovah, the dwelling-place of the true God; it held a place in the hearts of my people that never can be filled. Its temple was a wonder of wonders, built of hewn stone and ornamented with timbers brought from Mount Lebanon. The vessels used in the temple service were of pure gold and pure silver."

"I have seen them in the temple of Bel. They are indeed beautiful vessels, the like of which are not to be found in all Babylon," said the soldier.

"I remember hearing an old man, a Levite, telling of the splendors of the temple; the golden candlestick; the table of shew bread; the great altar; and the Holy of Holies, the dwelling-place of the Most High, which none but the high priest could enter and he but once a year," continued the Jew.

"What a pity the rebellion of thy people caused our great king to destroy so beautiful a city," remarked the Babylonian.

"It was the will of God," answered the Jew reverently.

"I have heard much concerning thy God, Heber," continued the soldier, after turning a moment to see if all was well with his command, "how great and powerful He is. It has always seemed strange to me that He allowed Jerusalem to be captured. Merodach or Bel would never permit our city to be so taken." The Jew smiled at his superior's assurance, visions of Tiglath Pileser, Shalmaneser, Sargon, Sennacherib and Asshur-bani-pal, great warriors before whom the proud city had fallen probably coming before his eyes. He wisely refrained from arguing with his master, but answered quickly.

"It was God's will that our fathers should be thus conquered as a punishment for their sins. We are now thoroughly repentant and shall never more forsake the worship of the true God; the God that brought our forefathers up out of

Egypt and has watched over us all these years. All Jews are praying for a speedy deliverance from captivity and are expecting that deliverance to come ere long, as the seventy years are well nigh completed."

"What seventy years meanest thou?" asked the Babylonian.

"The seventy years of captivity foretold by our great prophet,"* answered Heber. "Our leaders teach us the prophecy means seventy years from the time the first Jew was brought to Babylon. If their interpretation is correct the time is nearly completed, as it is now seven and sixty years since Nebuchadnezzar, thy great king, first brought Judah under his dominion and carried away the first captives. Only three years more and we shall all return to our native land."

The Babylonian smiled sarcastically as he made answer: "Thy hopes are unfounded I fear, my Heber. Never will the Jews be liberated as long as the present line of kings hold the Babylonish throne. King Nabonidos knows full well that times of danger are approaching. He fears the rising power of the Persian. It is now fifteen years since the Persian Cyrus defeated our allies, the Lydians, and our king fears Babylon will next receive his attention. Once we have beaten him off, but he is sure to try it again. Were the true king, the descendant of the great Nebuchadnezzar and the good Evil-Merodach upon the throne, we need not fear the power of the Persian. This powerful foe defeated, the liberation of the Jews might follow."

"Exists there such a man?" asked Heber.

"A priest once told me——"

Before Nabomuran could finish the sentence the conversation was interrupted by Belibus, the lieutenant of the troop, who, leaving his place at the center of the cavalcade, had galloped forward and placed himself at his superior's side.

"See!" he exclaimed, "the simoon!"

The commander turned his head in the direction pointed out by his assistant and saw that the sun, now on the edge of the

* Jeremiah 25:11.

horizon, was obscured by a dark cloud. The atmosphere was thick and murky, the wind was rising, the sand was even now beginning to whirl about in clouds and every indication of the dreaded simoon was manifest. To reach a place of shelter was impossible, so the soldiers must protect themselves as best they could. Nabomuran ordered them to dismount, a command instantly obeyed by all, soldiers and servants alike. The horses were unsaddled and compelled to lie down upon the sand in circles. The soldiers threw their saddle-cloths over the horses' heads to protect their eyes and nostrils from the flying, burning sand. Taking off their outer coats, they protected their own faces in like manner. Then lying prone upon the sand, close beside their faithful animals they awaited the coming of the storm. Nabomuran and his Jewish companion lay side by side in the outer circle of the company.

Several moments naturally had been required to make these preparations so that they had hardly taken their places beside their horses before the storm was upon them. The wind blew with terrible violence, carrying with it whirling clouds of heated sand caught up from the parched surface of the desert. The atmosphere had a lurid glow, the air was hot and stifling and the fine sand entered alike the nostrils of man and beast. The horses became restless. Several of them arose and before their riders could restrain them, were off across the desert at a gallop. One soldier was injured by being trodden under foot.

The storm steadily increased in severity until, some twenty minutes from the time the men had completed their arrangements for shelter, it had apparently reached its maximum strength and velocity. At this moment the young commander threw off the coat which protected his head, raised himself on his elbow, and placing his hand to his ear, listened attentively. From far off across the desert a faint cry reached his ear.

"H-e-l-p," it sounded.

He continued to listen and again came the cry. At the

third repetition of the cry he bounded to his feet, and regardless of the storm, forced his horse to rise. Calling upon the two soldiers nearest him to bear him company, he, without waiting to saddle, sprang upon his horse's back and rode off across the desert in the direction from which the cry had come. The soldiers called upon obeyed instantly, forced their unwilling steeds into a gallop and followed their commander at no great distance. With heads bowed upon their horses' necks the trio pushed forward, urging the faithful animals to their utmost. The breathing of the horses was short and difficult; their eyes and nostrils were inflamed, but still they pressed forward. The cry for help was repeated every few moments, serving to guide them to the spot whence it came. Suddenly Nabomuran, riding some fifty feet in front of his men, reined in his steed just in time to prevent trampling upon two prostrate figures that lay upon the sand directly in front of him and almost under his horse's hoofs. The young commander dismounted and knelt beside them.

"Jehovah be praised," the elder of the two persons exclaimed at sight of the soldier. "Help has reached us at last."

His companion upon hearing this half arose and removed the cloak from about her head, revealing to Nabomuran the features of a beautiful Jewess. She looked into his face with confidence, and noticing his soldier's dress, said: "I told thee, father, there must be soldiers near at hand. I was sure it was a soldier's horse that so nearly trampled upon us. I also remembered hearing of the arrival of a body of troops at Damascus the day we left there."

"Ay, Orma, thou art right as usual," said the old man tenderly; then, turning to the soldier, he said: "Canst thou, noble sir, give escort unto two helpless Jews? We have been robbed by our Arab attendants and left upon the desert, without even a horse."

"As soon as the storm abates we will seek my command

and thou shalt finish thy journey in our company," replied the soldier.

This conversation was of necessity a very hurried one, consuming far less time than its narration indicates, the severity of the storm making speech difficult. After replying to the old Jew's request Nabomuran threw himself upon the sand beside him, retaining a firm hold upon his horse's bridle, the animal having already shown symptoms of uneasiness. The soldiers took their places some ten or more feet away from the group.

For at least half an hour the little party lay muffled in their clothing, silent and motionless. By that time the storm had so far abated that Nabomuran deemed it safe to set out in search of his command. He therefore arose and called upon his men to do likewise. With his outercoat, which had been wrapped about his head during the storm, he improvised a saddle which he fastened upon his horse's back with the bridle reins, trusting the faithful beast to follow without guidance. He lifted the Jewess to her place upon the back of his own steed and assisted her father to mount a second horse. Such baggage as the thieving Arabs had left behind was packed upon the back of the remaining animal. The party was then ready to start.

Nabomuran placed his hand upon his horse's nose and spoke a few words to him in Babylonian. The intelligent beast seemed to catch his master's meaning and they started off at a slow walk, followed by the rest of the party. The two soldiers walked, each at the head of his own horse.

The conversation engaged in by the young commander and the old Jew had been in that mixed language, part Hebrew, part Babylonian which the inhabitants of the Golden City used when speaking with their captives. Nabomuran was therefore greatly surprised when he heard himself addressed in pure Babylonian by his fair companion.

"Is there any danger of missing thy way?" she asked.

"I think not, lady," he replied. "Although the sun has

now set I am confident of finding my command, especially as they will miss me and remain where I left them until my return."

"But suppose we do miss them?" she continued anxiously.

"We shall be obliged to camp on the desert until day" he replied.

Her fears were somewhat allayed by the confident manner of the soldier. She remained silent for some moments but eventually she spoke again.

"Listen sir," she exclaimed.

Nabomuran stopped. A trumpet blast could be distinctly heard in a direction nearly opposite to that they were pursuing.

"We are going in the wrong direction," he murmured. Then, placing his hands to his mouth so as to form a trumpet, he hallooed thrice.

Three long blasts from the trumpet answered him. The distant tramp of horses could be heard upon the still night air. The party remained where they had halted while the horsemen came nearer and nearer. In a few moments the party arrived and gave vent to shouts of joy at finding their beloved commander safe. The party consisted of about twenty men from the Winged Lions, headed by Nergalshazzar the trumpeter, and accompanied by the young Jew, Heber. The latter looked curiously at the old Hebrew but received no sign of recognition. The young lady, however, favored him with a smile, showing by that slight greeting that they were not unknown to one another.

Under the guidance of the newcomers, rescued and rescuers set off together and in less than half an hour they came upon the main body, which had remained where we last saw it while a picked troop had gone in search of its commander.

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT ON THE DESERT

Now that the party was reunited, Nabomuran turned his attention to the matter of securing some sort of shelter for the night. As far as the soldiers were concerned they could camp upon the desert as they had done many times before, but a lady was now of the party and for her sake the commander wished to find a suitable place to spend the night. He sent for Kudur, the chief of the servants. The Susianian came as ordered. When asked concerning a place of shelter he stood silent for a moment, and then told the commander of a brick enclosure situated some three miles east of their present station, to which he promised to guide them.

Preparations for the start were at once begun. The horses were resaddled, the pack mules reloaded and the cavalcade was soon ready to set out after a delay, occasioned by the storm, of more than two hours. Three litters were constructed; one for the old Jew, another for his daughter, and the third for the soldier injured in the stampede at the commencement of the storm. Several men whose horses had galloped away at that time were obliged to borrow mules from the servants.

Led by the Susianian, Kudur, the company took up its march. The safety and convenience of those in the litters made haste impossible. In columns of fours, a space between each four, the cavalcade was upwards of a quarter of a mile in length. The litters were carried by four servants each and were placed in the center of the troop. A guard of eight horsemen surrounded them to prevent an attack from the wild animals of the desert which, since sundown had made their appearance. A pack of jackals numbering a dozen or more kept them company until they reached their destination.

It was fully nine o'clock when Kudur turned to Nabomuran

(who was riding directly behind him) and, pointing to a low mass of masonry whose dim outline could be distinguished by the light of the newly risen moon, said: "Here master, is the place I told thee of."

Nabomuran rode forward to the gate and was about to enter when he suddenly discovered a previous tenant to be in possession. Just inside the entrance he distinguished the form of a gigantic male lion. The huge beast was standing upon all fours, lashing his tawny side with his powerful tail. His eyes flashed fire. Every muscle beneath his skin was swollen and his whole frame quivered with excitement and anger at being thus disturbed. He made an impressive but yet a terrible picture. He showed himself indeed the king of beasts.

The young commander reached over his shoulder for his bow and arrows. They were gone. In the excitement attendant upon the storm and the events following it they had been removed. His command was still some little distance to the rear, and before they could reach him the lion would spring. Kudur was but a few feet distant, but being a servant he was unarmed. The angry beast crouched for his terrible spring. A thought flashed into Nabomuran's mind. He grasped his battle-axe and tore it from his saddle, bursting the leather thongs that fastened it as though they had been silken threads. Rising in his saddle, he hurled the weapon at the beast with all the force of his strong right arm and with an accuracy born of constant practice. The axe struck the animal squarely upon the jaw, inflicting a painful but not fatal wound. Angered by this attack, the beast gave a great roar of pain and sprang at Nabomuran, who had no opportunity of escape. He watched with a calm despair the spring of the beast. He seemed charmed by the light of those terrible eyes and felt no fear. An instant only was the beast in the air. He had miscalculated. Instead of landing upon the horse's back, he fell upon the ground scarcely three feet distant. Ere he could rise and crouch for another spring a javelin whistled

through the air. It was thrown unerringly and pierced the beast to the heart.

Seeing his enemy thus vanquished, Nabomuran threw off his strange stupor and dismounted to look for his friend in need. A short, stocky man, clad in leather breeches, over which a long flowing robe of a bright scarlet hue was worn, stood close beside the Babylonian. Upon his head was a bright bronze helmet; his chest was protected by a thin breastplate of the same material and his legs were encased in leather boots. A golden chain was hung about his neck and golden bracelets encircled his wrists.

"Noble sir, to whom am I indebted for this act? Thou hast saved my life," said Nabomuran as he approached the stranger.

"My name is of little consequence," said the Mede, for such his dress and appearance betokened him. "I, accompanied by a few followers, was riding in this vicinity. During the recent storm I became separated from my companions and am now endeavouring to find them."

"The night is now upon us and to find them ere morning will be an impossibility," said the Babylonian. "Thou hadst best spend the night here with us and seek thy companions on the morrow."

"But sir, the Medes and Babylonians are now on terms of enmity and these, thy followers, look dangerous," answered the Mede, glancing at the troop which by this time had reached the gateway.

"The man who saved my life need have no fear of accepting my hospitality," replied Nabomuran with an air of quiet dignity.

"Forgive me that I doubted thee," said the stranger. "I gladly accept thy kind invitation."

Some servants now came forward and after considerable effort removed the carcass of the lion. The company then filed within the enclosure.

The retreat in which they found themselves was an ancient prototype of those khans now so universal throughout the east. It was a nearly square enclosure, measuring some three hundred

feet on each side, its four faces placed toward the cardinal points of the compass. Under the northern wall was a row of brick apartments intended as the sleeping places of the leaders of whatever company sought shelter within its walls. Directly opposite these apartments, and running parallel with the southern wall, was a low railing of palm wood intended as a hitching place for the dumb members of the party. The large open space in the center of the enclosure was intended as the camping-place of the ordinary merchants and the servants of the caravans for whose accommodation the building had been erected.

Once inside the enclosure every man dismounted and preparations for the night were instantly made. Belibus, the lieutenant of the troop, took the superintendence of the camping arrangements, leaving Nabomuran free to look after his guests. Assisted by some Hebrew servants he made the sleeping apartments as comfortable as the means at hand allowed. With tents and other articles of camp equipage, couches were constructed for the lady and the wounded men.

By the time these preparations were completed a party of Susianian servants appeared with the materials for the evening meal, which was to be served to the more distinguished members of the party in the apartment chosen by Nabomuran. The servants spread a large linen cloth upon the hard brick floor of the apartment and placed thereon the various articles of food. The food consisted of wheaten cakes, dates and honey. For drink they had palm wine with a small earthen bottle of grape wine brought from the south of Armenia. The party which gathered about this rough table consisted of seven persons, including the three soldiers, three guests and Heber. Belibus did not arrive until the others had nearly finished their repast, so engrossed had he been with his duties outside.

The meal over, Nabomuran and his lieutenant left the apartment and made a complete tour of the enclosure, carefully inspecting the arrangements made for the accommodation of the

men and horses. Having seen that everything possible had been done, they returned to the commander's apartment.

The group about the cloth was unchanged, save that the lady member of the party had sought the retirement of her chamber. The old Jew and the Mede were engaged in a religious discussion, particularly touching upon the subject of a future life after death, a subject then exciting much contention among the world's thinkers. The entrance of the two officers put an end to this discussion. The commander bowed to his guests with true Oriental deference as he entered.

"Come, my friends," he said, "as we are to spend the night together, it is fitting that we should know each other. To this end I will introduce myself. I am Nabomuran, son of Neboakhu, chief priest of the temple of Belus. As his son I am a noble of Babylon. In times of peace I command the king's body-guard; in times of war I am a general. I am returning from a special mission to Judea, under orders to reach Babylon in time to assist in the coronation ceremonies of young Belshazzar, my former pupil in archery and kindred sports, whom the king is to make his associate on the throne."

Having thus spoken the young commander took his place beside the cloth. The Mede now arose and, bowing to each member of the group in turn, thus spoke:

"Friends, for such we are here tonight, know me as Rastagus of Ecbatana, a soldier of Astyages, king of Media and now an officer in the army of Cyrus, king of Persia, the grandson of my former master. Although we are now known as thine enemies, yet I am thy guest and as such, thy friend. Should Cyrus and Nabonidos meet in war, which I fear they will, for our king resents the league thy monarch made with Croesus, king of Lydia, may the gods forbid my ever meeting one of this company in battle. Should we meet I promise not to forget this night's kind entertainment."

"Nor shall I, good Rastagus forget that king of spearmen who this day saved my life," said Nabomuran, rising to acknowledge the courtesy of his guest. "I, too, fear a war be-

tween Cyrus and Nabonidos and should that war come I shall do my duty as a soldier of Babylon, but never shall my hand be raised against Rastagus the Mede."

After exchanging these civilities the two future enemies resumed their seats upon the floor beside the cloth.

"It is now my turn," said the old Jew, rising. "Nehum, the son of Eladim, a prince of the tribe of Judah, am I. My father perished at the last siege of Jerusalem, when Nebuzaradan destroyed the city. I, a child of twelve years, was taken captive and carried to Babylon. For nine and forty years have I been a resident of that great city; but I am still a Jew, am still a follower of Jehovah. My daughter and I are returning from Jerusalem whither we carried the body of my deceased wife, the bride of my youth, my companion in captivity, the mother of my boy and girl. We traveled under escort of a body of Arabs hired by gold. On our return (for the special permission given me by the king required my immediate return) we were robbed of our horses and nearly all of our goods by the servants we had hired, and were left to perish on the desert. Had not the great God sent this noble soldier to our rescue we would have perished in the storm."

"And I," said Nabomuran's servant, Heber, rising as the old Jew was seated, "am Heber, the son of Nehum and that good woman I now learn for the first time is no more."

"Oh, my father," he cried, throwing himself at the old man's feet, "for the sake of that dear mother, I beg of thee to forgive thine erring boy. Remember not my perverseness, but grant me thy love and forgiveness."

"My son," replied Nehum, clasping Heber to his breast, "the forgiveness is granted. Praise the Lord I can again take thee back to my heart."

"This reconciliation is pleasant to behold," said the Babylonian, "but such reunions are too sacred for the eyes of strangers. I am sure we shall be pleased to excuse thee," turning to the old Jew. "There is probably much thou wouldst like to say to thy son in private."

With many thanks for the consideration of the young commander the two Hebrews bade farewell to the assembled company and withdrew to the apartment of Nehum. The company now numbered but four persons, the three soldiers and the Mede. The latter at once turned the conversation to the subject of Babylonian history.

"I have heard," he said, "that thy king, Nabonidos, is not of royal birth."

This remark led Nabomuran into a brief summary of events in Babylon since the destruction of Nineveh eighty-six years before, closing thus: "The true royal line came to an end just twenty years back, when the rab mag Neriglissar assassinated the king Evil-Merodach."

"I see," replied the Mede, "but O noble Babylonian, I can tell thee of something concerning the house of Nabopolassar that thou knowest not. It is this. Some seventeen years ago I was a member of a hunting party that went from the palace of Astyages into the forest some miles from Ecbatana. We hunted with great success for several days, pushing farther and farther into the forest each day. Late in the afternoon of the eighth day I came upon the track of a boar and, without calling my comrades, I set off in pursuit of the animal. So intent was I upon my hunt that I did not notice the sun's rapid journey toward the horizon. At length I came upon the boar and easily killed him. It was then dark, but I determined if possible to find my companions, so I set out upon my return, thinking to come back after the carcass of the boar on the morrow. For more than three hours I stumbled along through the forest without finding any trace of my party. It being plain to me that I was lost in the woods, I abandoned all hope of rejoining my companions before morning and began to seek a place of shelter for the night. Another half hour I trudged along. At length I saw just before me a dim light. With a cry of joy I bounded forward toward the spot whence the light proceeded. I saw that it came from out a deep cave reached by a long low passage. Knowing that such a light was made only

by man, I boldly entered the passage and groped my way along towards the cavern. The tunnel narrowed as it neared the cave until I was obliged to crawl upon my hands and knees in order to make my way along. As I neared the interior the light became stronger and brighter, serving to guide me through the rough passage. Finally I came to the spot where the tunnel entered the cave. I crawled through the narrow opening and found myself in the interior of a spacious chamber, hewn from the solid rock by the hand of nature. Hanging from an iron hook cemented into the ceiling was an earthen lamp whose light had guided me hither. Beneath the lamp was a wooden table covered with clay tablets and rolls of parchment. Seated at the table, with his back toward me, was an old man clad in a long white robe. His snow-white beard reached nearly to his waist, and his hoary locks flowed over his neck and shoulders like a silvery waterfall. So intent was he upon the perusal of the documents in front of him that he had not noticed my entrance. For several moments I stood regarding him in silence, but at length I addressed him.

“‘Kind sir,’ I said, ‘I am a hunter lost in the forest. The light which streamed from out the entrance to thine abode guided me here and seemed to bid me enter, so here I am. Canst thou give me shelter for the night?’”

The old man arose and, after regarding me searchingly for some moments, said:

“‘Son, thou art welcome to my abode. Enter and do as thine inclinations bid thee.’”

“He pointed to an oaken stool which I secured and seated myself opposite him. He seemed willing to talk, so we sat there for several hours discussing events in the outside world. At length I asked him what had caused him to separate himself from his fellow-men. This is the story he told me.

“‘My son, I am Kuri-Sipak the Chaldean. My birthplace was Calneh in the land of Babylonia. When I was one and twenty years of age I left my boyhood’s home and journeyed to Babylon, where I entered the service of the gods. I studied

day and night, poring over every record I could obtain and searching for knowledge wherever it could be found. I studied the ancient tablets; how Ea saved Xisuthros from the flood by causing him to build a great ship that would carry him safely over the waters; and how Gilgames, the hero, journeyed to the other world and heard from the lips of Xisuthros the story of his escape from the waters. I studied the moon and the stars that nightly show themselves above us, revealing to the student by their ever-changing positions the secrets and plans of the gods. My learning made me famous and brought me into favor with the king, the great Nabopolassar. Next to the king I was the greatest man in all Babylon. To me he intrusted the teaching of his children, particularly the young prince Nebuchadnezzar. I was with the prince daily and sought to instil within him noble thoughts and ideas. I taught him of the gods and their servants, the heavenly bodies.

“At length the prince reached manhood. His days of study were over and he must needs enter upon a career of war. Trouble arose with the king of Egypt and the old king sent his son to battle with the invader. The Egyptian was defeated, and the young prince pressed onward to Jerusalem, the holy city of the Hebrews. While he was thus engaged the old king died, alone save for me. I sent messengers to Judea to inform the young prince of his father's death, and to urge him to return to Babylon without delay. A conspiracy was formed to wrest the throne from him ere he could return, but I thwarted it. Son, looking at these silver locks and this wasted form, thou wouldst not think me a royal personage. Yet I, even I, was king-regent of Babylon, that mighty empire. The prince hurried home, crossing the desert with only his body-guard as an escort and reached Babylon in less than thirty days. I turned the throne over to him and he held it for three and forty years. He fought many wars, extending his dominions in every direction. In his old age he turned his thoughts to building, and made of his capital city the greatest and most beautiful city in the world.

“After mounting his throne he forgot the Chaldean, his teacher, who kept his inheritance for him. He dreamed a dream which I could not interpret for him, and he would have put all the wise men to death but for one Daniel, a Hebrew, who revealed to him its meaning. Daniel was placed over me and became the greatest man in Babylon. I stayed in the temple and worshiped the gods, waiting for the day to come when Kuri-Sipak should again become great. I lived to see the great Nebuchadnezzar become as a beast of the field, crawling upon all fours and eating grass with the beasts. During these years Daniel, the Hebrew, ruled in conjunction with Neriglissar, the rab mag; but my time was coming. Nebuchadnezzar recovered from his strange malady but his strength was gone and in less than a year he died. His son Evil-Merodach* succeeded him. He was forty years of age when he became king, just in the prime of his noble manhood, but the gods, through men, decreed that his reign should be a short one. As a youth he had been a constant visitor at the temple, and from me he had learned much of history and science. When he became king he remembered the old man, his instructor. He restored me to the position I had held under his grandfather, and the Hebrew, Daniel, became merely one of the wise men.

“All now seemed bright before me and I gave thanks to the gods for permitting me to enjoy a peaceful old age. For one year and nine months we lived in happiness and then came the fatal hour, the hour in which Babylon’s glory began to fade. Among the men displaced by Evil-Merodach when he became king was the former rab mag, Neriglissar. This man became enraged at the good king for setting at liberty the king of the Jews, who had been in prison all these years, and began conspiring against his master. With some twenty nobles as base as himself this Assyrian, (for, thanks be to Bel, he was not of Chaldea,) hatched his plot.

“One evening I was in the palace conversing with the king

* Amil-Marduk in native texts.

upon the subject of astronomy, a study for which he had a great passion. We were in the midst of a friendly debate when a eunuch entered and informed the king that Neriglissar was without and desired an interview with him. The kind-hearted monarch bade me withdraw for a few moments. I obeyed and a moment later while walking through the corridor, someone tapped me on the shoulder and whispered my name. I turned quickly and recognized one of the younger priests from the temple.

“‘Quick, father,’ said he, ‘they are murdering the king.’”

“‘I became as a madman. Not knowing what I did I rushed to the queen’s apartment and told her of the dire event. With all the bravery of her nature she picked up her babe, the young prince Sheshbazzar, and started for the king’s library, that being the room I had just left.

“‘Most mighty queen,’ I cried, ‘imperil not thy life and the life of Babylon’s future king.’”

“‘Shall Nitocris fear to die with her husband?’ answered the queen with all the dignity of the wife of one king and the daughter of another.

“‘She went not far, however, for scarcely ten feet from her chamber door, she met the king running from his enemies. She turned and led her lord into her own apartment.

“‘They dare not enter the chamber of their queen,’ she cried.

“‘She gave too great credit to the assassins, however, for the royal party had barely entered her apartment when their enemies were upon them. Just as the ruffians entered some one pulled my gown. I turned and saw a slave girl, the young prince’s nurse, holding a child in her arms.

“‘Change my boy for the young prince,’ she whispered tearfully.

“‘I saw her meaning at once and, taking the child from her, I rushed toward the queen. In a few whispered words I told her of the plan to save her babe and the change was effected. With the little prince in my arms I escaped through a side

door. Just outside the door I met the young priest who had first warned me of the plot.

“‘Here, take this child to the temple and watch it as thou wouldst the holy fire on the altar,’ I whispered.

“He bowed silently and, hiding the child in the folds of his gown, left the palace. I returned to the queen’s apartment, determined to die with my king. I was too late to be of any service. The good monarch lay upon the floor, pierced by a dozen swords. Across his body lay that of the slave girl’s babe. The queen, loved by every inhabitant of Babylon, was unmolested. She stood as an image of stone, gazing calmly at the murderers of her husband. I shall never forget how she looked, her dark Egyptian eyes flashing fire.

“‘Go,’ she cried, pointing to the doorway, ‘you have done your worst. Leave the chamber of your queen at once.’

As Neriglissar turned to depart his venomous eye fell on me, “‘Ha, Kuri, hast thou escaped our vengeance? Think not it is for long. The fate of the master is none too good for the man,’ he said.

“‘Good Kuri,’ said the queen after they had gone, ‘save thyself. For thine act this night all Babylon will some day honor thee. When that babe, saved by thee this night, shall have grown to manhood he will avenge this murder and then the name of Kuri-Sipak shall become an honored one. Go now and save thyself while there is yet time.’

“I departed, leaving the palace by the same secret way the young priest had taken, and made my way across the city to the temple. Knowing full well the threat of Neriglissar was not an idle one, I made preparations for my escape. I dyed my hair and beard and disguised myself as a Hebrew. Taking with me a few of my precious documents, I left the temple, accompanied by the young priest in whose charge I had placed the babe. I had with me a small block of clay bearing the impression of King Evil-Merodach’s seal and with its aid I was able to pass through the gates. Just outside the city I parted from my companion.

“Watch over that babe as thou wouldst thine own life. He is Sheshbazzar, the king of Babylon. Keep his name a secret. Bring him up as thine own child and when the proper time comes, reveal unto him his identity and urge him to avenge this night's deed,” said I in parting.

“Then we said farewell, he reentering the city and I starting upon my journey, which led I knew not whither. Night after night I tramped on, hiding by day wherever I could find a shelter, until at last I came upon this cave. Here I have remained during the three years that have now elapsed since the night my king was murdered and here I expect to die. Never more shall I look upon that great city whose every brick is dear to me, nor look into the faces of my old companions. Kuri-Sipak is forgotten already, but here I am determined to die. Here I am at leisure to study and write as I desire, and here I am far removed from ambitious, plotting men. Only a mile from here I found a bed of clay which will furnish me with all the writing materials I can use in the short life yet remaining to me. Son, I am going to exact of thee a pledge. Promise me thou wilt notice well the location of this cave and twenty years hence come here, bury my poor bones and take away my writings with thee that the world may have the benefit of my studies. I see thou art not a Babylonian, so I cannot ask thee to assist Sheshbazzar when he arises to claim that which is his right.”

“The old man bowed his head when he had finished speaking,” continued Rastagus, “but when I arose to speak he looked up at me in a solemn impressive manner. ‘Hear me,’ said I, ‘I am not a Babylonian, but a Mede, yet I swear to thee, should I live to see Sheshbazzar striving to win his throne, I, Mede though I am, with what followers I can command, will go to his assistance.’”

“So thou seest, good Nabomuran, neither Nabonidos nor Belshazzar is thy true king. This rescued child should now be a man of twenty-two or twenty-three, fully old enough to claim his right. I ask of thee a pledge. Wilt thou promise

that when Sheshbazzar stands forth, declares himself and seeks to gain his throne, thou wilt send a messenger to Rastagus the Mede, that I may fulfill the promise made to Kuri-Sipak the Chaldean?"

"I promise that most willingly," answered the Babylonian. "Hear me, good Rastagus, while I make a vow. When Sheshbazzar stands forth to claim his right, I swear by Bel and Nebo, Nabomuran shall espouse his cause and help to wrest the throne from those who now occupy it."

The Mede bowed solemnly as the Babylonian made his vow; then, before rising he asked: "Hast thou ever heard of this rescued babe before?"

"A priest once told me it was so reported at the time of Evil-Merodach's murder, but of late people seem to have forgotten it. From this day forth I shall make it my duty to hunt diligently for this man and apprise him of his royal rights," answered Nabomuran.

"The night is now far spent," said the Mede. "Therefore I will bid thee farewell till the morrow."

The two men embraced each other warmly and then parted for the night. Nabomuran stood in the low arched doorway of his apartment and watched Rastagus as he walked across the sandy floor of the enclosure toward his sleeping-place. After he had entered his apartment the young Babylonian turned back, and bidding a kind farewell to his two subordinates, who had departed immediately after Rastagus, he wrapped himself in his cloak and lay down to a well earned rest.

CHAPTER III

THE GOLDEN CITY

Late in the afternoon of the second day following the foregoing events, a small party was approaching Babylon from the southwest. It consisted only of Nabomuran, Heber, and the

old Jew and his daughter. The Winged Lions had remained behind at Borsippa under the command of Belibus, there to remain until the morning of Belshazzar's inauguration day when they were to report to their commander on the parade ground east of the great temple. Rastagus the Mede had risen early upon the morning following his stay on the desert and, bidding his host a hasty farewell, had tramped off across the desert toward the north in search of his followers.

The old Jew and his daughter had realized how seriously their riding in litters impeded the progress of their companions and they therefore volunteered to ride upon horses. Nabomuran was overjoyed at receiving their proposal, as his presence in the capital at least two days before the coronation was imperative. He improvised a side-saddle upon which the fair Orma sat with rare grace. The young commander rode alone at the head of the little company. His servant, Heber, rode in silence just behind him.

Heber had been strangely silent and perplexed during the two days since the night on the desert, when after three years of separation and misunderstanding, he had been received again into his father's love. Over and over again since his reconciliation had he revolved the question of his duty. Should he leave his master and return to his father's habitation or should he remain with the Babylonian, at whose hands he had received so many kindnesses? It was a difficult question to decide and it was not until the last moment that his choice was made.

Though Nabomuran had traveled over the famous thoroughfare many times before, the first view of Babylon as he approached the city from the southwest was always impressive. Scarcely had the topmost stage of the great temple of Nebo at Borsippa* faded from the view ere the dazzling sunlight, reflected from the gilded roof of the temple of Belus, struck the travelers' eyes. The sun was nearly upon the horizon but

* The ruins of this remarkable building are still standing about fifteen miles to the southwest of the ruins of Babylon. It was at one time thought to be the traditional Tower of Babel.

its rays still lingered upon the majestic pinnacle of the great temple. The road they were traversing was straight and wide and the most frequented thoroughfare in Babylonia. Upon this particular afternoon, however, it was well nigh deserted. A quarter of a mile ahead were two horsemen. Off to the east a company of Jews could be seen tilling a large wheatfield, through which flowed one of Nebuchadnezzar's irrigating canals. Still farther east the hazy atmosphere betokened the vicinity of the Euphrates, that great river whose waters washed the shores of Paradise in the days before man fell from his divine estate.

The road at this point was lined with vast grain fields just ready for the first harvest and in some of the fields laborers with long sickles were at work cutting the golden stalks. Occasionally a grove of majestic palms varied the monotony of the usually treeless country. Every few rods they passed some tomb wherein lay the bones of some great man, who possibly had witnessed those glories of Babylon that were now upon the decline.

So impressed were the members of the party with the scenes of beauty about them, that they rode on in perfect silence, all lost in admiration of the wonderful panorama. The hitherto indistinct mass that denoted the situation of the great city was now rapidly becoming clear. The sun's rays no longer made of the temple roof a huge dazzling mirror and they could gaze upon the beauty of the city without inconvenience to their eyes. Already the walls, crowned with their numberless watch towers, were easily distinguished and even the little moving dots of men upon its summit were clearly seen.

It was not, however, until they rode over the brow of a slight elevation and began descending its eastern slope that the real view of the city burst upon them. There at their feet lay the mistress of the world, proud Babylon, "the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency," as she was termed by the prophet Isaiah. No first view of any modern city could

compare with the wonderful stupendousness of the scene beneath them. The great wall, one hundred and fifty feet * in height and fourteen miles on each face, (a total circumference of fifty-six miles) lay immediately before them, stretching away in either direction from the gate they were about to enter. The upper stories of the great pyramidal temple rose heavenward many feet above the walls. All other buildings within the city were invisible from their vantage point, so complete and high were the mammoth bulwarks that separated the people of Babylon from their enemies.

At the base of the great outer wall ran a wide, deep moat denying access to the city after seven o'clock in the evening.

At that hour the sentinels on duty lifted the long palm wood bridges and closed the great brazen gates. After that time no man could enter or depart without a pass from the king or the rab mag. As it was now nearly the closing time, Nabomuran urged his steed into a gallop and motioned his companions to do likewise. A few moments later they galloped over the narrow bridge and passed through the great Shamas Bab (sun gate), the largest and most important of the twenty-five gates piercing the great wall on its western face.

The party were now within the precincts of the great city but they were by no means at their journey's end. A wide belt of land, mostly under cultivation, although a few low cottages were to be seen, lay between them and the inner wall of the city. There was no longer need of unusual haste, for the inner gates were closed only in times of emergency and the bridge over the river was not removed until late in the evening. Inside the wall the scene was entirely changed. From a mere highway the Borsipian road had become a wide and well paved thoroughfare. Like the other streets of the city it was as straight as an arrow. Every two-thirds of a

* The figures of Q. Curtius whose estimate is about midway between the highest and lowest of other writers. Herodotus makes them three hundred and thirty feet high while Strabo calls them only seventy five feet. It is difficult to reconcile these various estimates.

mile marked a square where another street, as wide and well paved, crossed it at right angles.

As the party neared the inner wall they began to meet more people. The two men who had been riding ahead of them since early in the afternoon were now but a few feet distant and their identity could be established. Hearing the tramp of horses so near them the two priests (for such their attire denoted them) turned to meet the party. Nabomuran halted, dismounted and advanced to meet the elder of the priests, who also dismounted. They met midway between the two companies, falling upon each other's necks in true Oriental fashion.

"I am glad to see thee safely returned, my son," said the old priest.

"Thanks be to the gods I am permitted to behold thee once more, my father. It seems years instead of months since we parted," answered Nabomuran.

The soldier presented his father and the other priest to his fellow-travelers and then the enlarged party moved forward again. A few rods farther on they again came to a halt, this time at a call from Nehum. The young commander again dismounted, going directly to the side of the Jewess, whom he assisted to the ground. The house before which they halted was typical of the suburbs of the great city. It was constructed entirely of brick and was roofed with timbers of palm wood, covered with highly glazed tiles. Along its western face ran a long low veranda, supported by columns of palm wood, encircled with bunches of reeds, the whole covered with plaster and painted a light blue, contrasting strangely with the somber hue of the house itself. While it was only two stories in height the building spread out over considerable ground. The occupation of such a house proved Nehum to be a man of some importance and wealth.

"Noble sir," said the old Jew, taking the soldier's hand, "I cannot express my gratitude to thee for our rescue and protection. Here I dwell while in this land, and here I shall be pleased to welcome thee at any time."

"My poor service is of little account, but I thank thee for thine invitation, and hope to avail myself of it," replied the soldier.

Orma came forward shyly but yet with an air of perfect self-possession.

"I can but repeat my father's words," she said.

"Fair lady," replied Nabomuran, "I am indeed happy if I have been of any service to thee. I hope I may have the pleasure of again meeting thee when I call at thy abode."

The farewells were said and the two Jews turned to enter the path that led up to their habitation. Nehum stopped suddenly and turned to his son, who sat silent and gloomy upon his horse's back.

"Heber, my son, stayest thou here with us or wilt thou continue with thy kind master?" he asked.

Nabomuran hastened to say: "Decide for thyself, Heber. If thou wishest to remain with thy father thou hast my consent."

The young man sat silent for a moment, his head bowed upon his breast. Throughout the day he had been dreading this moment and now that it was come he still was unprepared to make the decision. He felt the eyes of all upon him and it embarrassed him. After some moments he answered: "I will stay with my master for the present."

"So be it," answered his father, disappointed at the decision.

The sentinels at the inner gate bowed deferentially to the two noblemen as they rode through into the city proper. From a rural suburb they had now passed into a thickly-settled, populous city. The Borsipian road, still retaining the same name, was lined upon both sides with the residences of the wealthy and the noble. Houses three and four stories high, surrounded by spacious grounds and gardens followed each other in rapid succession. It was a brilliant and beautiful sight. The cool of the evening had arrived and many of the residents were enjoying themselves, sitting upon their broad verandas or strolling through their gardens. From out of some of the houses floated the sounds of music, the sweet low chords of the harp

and sambuca, the shrill toot of the horn or the weird strains of the symphonia. Occasionally a woman's voice could be heard rehearsing in song some old tale of the gods or of Gilgames, the Babylonian Hercules.

Beyond the fashionable dwellings came a few houses of business, after which the street came to an abrupt end at a broad stairway leading up the mound on whose summit the old palace (now very seldom used as a royal residence) was erected. This palace had several times been assigned to the Winged Lions as a barrack. Here they were obliged to make a detour, going completely around the palace and emerging upon the river just north of it. The platforms of the drawbridge were in place, and they galloped over. Had they been too late for the bridge, they would have been obliged to cross the river in a boat, leaving their horses on the western side until morning. Once upon the eastern side of the river they urged their steeds forward and fifteen minutes later entered the precincts of the great temple. They rode around the base of the enormous building, and out at the northern gateway of the enclosure, emerging upon a street lined with rows of houses, all save one built after a uniform design. The first house on the northern side of the street was larger and more pretentious than its neighbors. Before this house they came to a stop and dismounted. The gate was opened and three servants came out. Two of them took charge of the horses and the third led the way into the dwelling. The young priest, who had been Neboakhu's traveling companion, dismounted with the others, and gave his horse to a servant, but instead of entering the house (the chief priest's home), he walked on to his own residence.

As soon as Neboakhu and Nabomuran had removed the stains of travel, supper was served in the dining room of the dwelling. While they were yet sitting at the table, a servant called out Nabomuran. The soldier emptied the wine goblet he was holding and passed through into the reception room where a magnificently dressed man about fifty years of age,

awaited him. As Nabomuran entered the room, the visitor arose to greet him.

"Allow me to be the first to welcome thee home to Babylon," said the visitor.

"I am glad to see thee, noble Vulmaran," replied the soldier. "How go matters at the palace?"

"Our lord Merodach has been with thee I see," continued the courtier. "Thou hast returned looking more comely than before. The king is more inactive than ever, takes more pleasure in the vanities of life and seems to have lost all the ambitions he once possessed. He is daily becoming craftier, more cruel, and harder to please."

"And the young prince?" asked the soldier.

"Belshazzar, with all the exuberance of childhood looks forward eagerly to his coming inauguration. He thinks not of the cares and responsibilities the office carries with it; he sees only the glory and the tinsel," answered the rab mag, that being the courtier's position.

"The young prince was my pupil in archery and other sports. Does he still take interest in such matters?"

"Nay," replied Vulmaran, "behind his years in physical power, he is far ahead of them in sensuality. Already he takes the greatest delight in his wine and his women."

"Alas, Vulmaran," said Nabomuran sadly, "this nation is illy prepared to meet Cyrus with his countless hosts of well-trained men, all inured to hardship. Neither Nabonidos nor Belshazzar is the man to lead the armies of Babylon against her enemies."

"Thou art right," answered the official. "When fighting comes thou art the man on whom we must depend. But I am forgetting mine errand hither. The king has been informed of thy arrival and has sent me to summon thee to the royal presence at once. My chariot stands without ready to carry thee to the palace."

"If I am to visit royalty I must change my attire. I will not keep thee waiting long," said Nabomuran.

"I will wait patiently," said the rab mag.

Vulmaran reclined upon a luxurious divan while the soldier was changing his attire. When the young man again entered the room the official arose to meet him, as before, but more particularly to look him over. Critical as was this court retainer, he could find nothing amiss in the soldier's attire. From head to foot he was the gentleman of rank, wearing his jasper seal and carrying his gold-headed cane.

"Thou wilt do," said the courtier.

They left the house together and entered the gaudy chariot of Vulmaran. The driver applied the lash and away rolled the vehicle over the smooth pavement. Just as they started the moon arose from behind the temple and flooded their way with light, illuminating the buildings as they passed. Two of the palace gates were closed but Vulmaran's pass caused them to open in succession. The third and innermost portal had not been closed. With a final flourish the driver reined in his steeds before the great emblazoned entrance of the royal palace. The rows of guards standing in the porch saluted as the two men passed between them. The rab mag led the way through the deserted hallway to a large room, the royal library. At the doorway they were detained while a eunuch carried their names to the king. He returned in a moment.

"It is the will and pleasure of the king that the noble Nabomuran enter his presence. Thou, noble Vulmaran, he bids seek thy home for the night, but he desires thy company early in the morning," said the eunuch.

Nabomuran bade the rab mag good night, and entered the room. Vulmaran remained outside a moment.

"Remember, Gaddina, I want a report of this interview," he said to the eunuch. The man bowed and slipped silently through the draperies of the doorway.

"I like not the presence of this young man at this time. I have nothing against him personally, but I fear he will stand in my way, especially if my suspicions concerning him are correct. Beware, Nabomuran, cross not my path for I am desperate."

After thus apostrophizing the absent soldier the wily rascal left the palace.

The apartment entered by the soldier was a spacious and magnificent one, one hundred feet in length by sixty in width. Its walls were of glazed bricks whose surface bore many pictured scenes of war and hunt. Chief among the scenes were those illustrating the campaigns of Nebuchadnezzar, by whom the building had been erected.

With slow step and bowed head Nabomuran approached the eastern end of the apartment where, upon a couch covered with those rare rugs and carpets for which Babylon was noted, beneath a rich canopy of embroidered muslin, reclined a man in middle life. His size and shape were not clearly visible but one would call him short and extremely stout. One bare ankle which projected from beneath his costly linen gown, was fat and flabby. His hair and beard, which once had been as black as Nabomuran's own, were now liberally besprinkled with silver. His eyes were small and deep set. The whole bearing of the man was one of luxurious effeminacy. This was Nabonidos, king of Babylon, a man once noted for his strength and activity; now sunk into the depths of gluttony, drunkenness and lasciviousness.

The king was the only occupant of the room, it plainly being his desire to have the interview a private one. Nabomuran approached the raised platform upon which the monarch's couch rested, and knelt upon the lowest step.

"I am here at thy command, O King," he said.

"Arise, Nabomuran, we will dispense with all formality tonight, our business being of the utmost importance," said the monarch, his shrill falsetto voice contrasting with the deep baritone of the soldier.

"I first desire a full report of thy mission to Judea," continued the king.

Nabomuran narrated every incident of his journey, from the day he left Babylon until he returned, omitting only his meeting with Rastagus.

"Thy report is satisfactory. I then have nothing to fear from Judea?"

"I would no greater danger was near than a rising there. The country is in ruins; the inhabitants too few and too poor to think of rebellion," replied the soldier.

"My greatest fear," said the monarch, "is of trouble here in the city. The rumors concerning one Sheshbazzar, who is said to be the son of Evil-Merodach, are continually spreading. I have used every means to find the man but without avail. It is said he knows nothing of his royal birth but certain discontented nobles are seeking for him to urge him to rebellion. Hast thou ever heard of the man?"

During this speech Nabonidos had kept his eyes fastened upon the young man's face, studying it intently.

"I have heard it said the babe was rescued at the time of Evil-Merodach's murder, but if such a man exists I know him not," was the reply.

"I believe thy words, Nabomuran," said the king, "and I feel that I can depend upon thee. I have been told that a plot to seat this man is on foot and is liable to culminate at the time of our son's coronation. I give it thee in charge to look into this matter and put down such a rebellion the moment it shows its head. Where is thy command?"

"At Borsippa, O King."

"It is my pleasure that a trusty messenger be sent at once, this night, to bid them come to Babylon with all haste. I place the old palace at thy disposal. Thou hast an hundred men?"

"Precisely an hundred. By a custom instituted at the time the Winged Lions were organized, we always have an hundred men. When one dies or withdraws, another is ready to fill the vacancy," replied the commander.

"It is well," said the king. "Thou wilt divide thy command into two bands of fifty men each. One thou wilt command; the other, Belibus. Each company will patrol the city twelve hours out of the twenty-four, six hours on duty and six hours off. Thus by day and by night thy horsemen will

be on guard. If they see aught suspicious, the infantry will be ordered out. Send thy messenger at once, as soon as he can start. Now thou canst go."

Nabomuran made a profound bow and withdrew.

CHAPTER IV

HEBER'S MIDNIGHT RIDE

Nabomuran left the royal residence by the way he had entered. He found in waiting one of the king's chariots, ready to carry him to his home. As he was on the point of mounting it a servant came hurriedly out with word for him to return to the king's presence. He returned at once, finding the monarch lying in the same manner as during the previous interview. Standing at the end of the king's couch was a bright and not unhandsome youth of about fifteen years of age. When Nabomuran entered the apartment the lad left his station and ran down the room to meet the soldier. Throwing himself into the young man's arms, he cried: "Welcome home, my teacher. It seems ages since last I saw thee."

"Prince, I have missed one who was so apt a scholar," answered the soldier. "How goes the practice?"

"Alas!" answered Belshazzar, "I have now no time for practice. I must attend the councils that I may learn the ways of government for, thou knowest, I am to be king."

The young prince danced with childish glee as he made this announcement. Truly he looked forward eagerly to his coming responsibilities, unconscious of the trials attendant upon kingship.

Nabomuran stepped forward to the platform, avoiding any further demonstration on the boy's part.

"I called thee back to give thee my pass that will enable thy messenger to get through the gates," said the king, as he handed the soldier a small clay tablet.

Nabomuran bowed as he received it. Kneeling he kissed the monarch's outstretched hand and then withdrew. He passed out through the great ornamental porch and entered the chariot, which still awaited him. The return trip from the palace was made in remarkable time and no wonder, for the stables of Nabonidos were famed throughout the world.

Upon entering his own dwelling Nabomuran removed his slippers and walked softly down the wide hall to his own small room at the end. He silently pushed aside the heavy draperies screening the entrance, and stepped within. Upon a couch in the farther corner of the chamber lay the silent form of Heber, wrapped in deep slumber. The soldier called: "Heber, awake."

There was no response. Again the soldier called, but still there was no movement on the sleeper's part to show that he heard his master. Nabomuran repeated his summons, this time placing his mouth close to the sleeper's ear. Heber awoke at the last call and seeing his master, sprang to his feet. While he hastily attired himself Nabomuran explained the cause of his nocturnal visit.

"The king bids me send a trusty man to Borsippa this night and order the Winged Lions to march at once. As thou art the most trusty man I know, it is my wish that thou shouldst carry the message. Wilt thou undertake it? If the king's fears are not without grounds the journey may prove a dangerous one, but I feel sure thou wilt get through in safety. My horse Saru will take thee as the wind, after which he is named."

"I will go, master," was the young man's simple answer.

"Then thou wilt call Susa and bid him saddle Saru while I indite the message to Belibus."

Nabomuran passed down the stone staircase to the first floor and entered the room used as the library or study. Here a dim light was burning. With his keen-edged dagger he trimmed the wick and the light blazed up brightly. Upon a table in one corner of the room stood an earthen bowl partially filled with soft, damp clay. Taking therefrom a handful of

the clay he rolled it out flat with a bronze roller, carefully trimming it square with his dagger. Then with a sharp instrument, he began indenting upon the soft clay his message to his lieutenant and friend. It read thus:

Babylon, the eighth day of Tammuz in the
sixteenth year of King Nabonidos.

Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard, to Belibus,
Lieutenant, Borsippa:—

May the good will of our lords Merodach and Bel be with thee and bless thee forever.

I send thee greeting, my Belibus, and with it a message from the king, may Bel be his comforter. Thus saith the king: Bid the Winged Lions come to Babylon with all haste. Come therefore at once; wait not for the light of day. The business of the king is urgent.

Nabomuran.

The message completed the soldier took the tablet and passed through into the kitchen of the house, where a small kiln stood ready for his purpose. Placing the tablet in the kiln he turned and retraced his steps to the library, where he sat down to await Heber's coming. After the young Jew's entrance, Nabomuran reëntered the kitchen, removed the now hardened tablet from the kiln, and placed it in a leather pouch. Returning to the library he handed the pouch to Heber, who suspended it about his neck by the strap intended for that purpose. The soldier next handed him the king's pass which he slipped into his girdle where it could easily be located when needed.

The two men passed out into the entrance hall of the dwelling. After a silent parting embrace Heber stepped out into the darkness and passed down the steps to the street. Without the door stood the servant Susa, holding Saru firmly by the bridle. The noble Arab liked not the idea of a midnight ride and was restlessly pawing the ground. Heber gathered his gown about his loins and vaulted into the saddle. Susa let go

his hold upon the animal's bridle, and at a word from Heber Saru bounded forward, shaking his head viciously. Heber reined him down to a long, steady gallop, well calculated to cover the distance in good time.

At the drawbridge over the Euphrates he halted, the platforms not being in place. An officer appeared to whom Heber showed the king's pass.

"Follow me," he said, handing back the tablet.

With one hand upon Saru's bridle the officer led the way down the street running beside the river. Just south of the bridge they turned to the right and descended a long, inclined plane that led down to a dark tunnel. A soldier bearing a small lamp came out of a brick sentry-box at the tunnel's mouth. The officer turned to retrace his steps and Heber followed the soldier into the tunnel. Guided by the flickering light Heber made his way slowly and cautiously over the slippery pavement, Saru resisting at every step. Over their heads flowed the Euphrates, its presence manifested by the all-pervading dampness and by the drops of water that percolated through the brick lining of the tunnel.

Emerging from the tunnel on the western bank of the river Heber waved his thanks to his conductor and chirruped to Saru to go ahead again. The horse bounded forward. A moment later they turned a corner and headed toward the west. They were now upon the Borsipian road and Heber felt relieved, deeming the way clear before him.

Except for the occasional call of a sentry on the distant walls Saru's galloping hoofs were the only disturbers of the oppressive stillness. Every hoofbeat sounded loud and clear upon the hard pavement. There was joy in the young rider's heart as he flew along. The confidence of his master caused a sense of his own importance to swell up within him. After passing through the inner wall, horse and rider settled down to the work before them; a silent fellowship seemed to spring up between the pair, both feeling the dignity of their errand.

Suddenly Saru reared in air and began backing. Heber

tried with voice and blow to urge him onward, but without avail. He continued backing, his whole delicate body a tremble.

"Proceed no farther," called a low voice, and a moment later a tall figure clad wholly in spotless white stepped forth from behind a small grove of palm trees. Heber observed on the instant that he was almost directly before his father's residence. He continued his efforts to calm his steed but the frightened animal saw something uncanny in the white vision and settled back upon his haunches, trembling in every limb. Heber grasped his master's battle-axe, which hung in its accustomed place upon the saddle, raised his arm aloft and in another moment would have hurled the weapon at the mysterious figure before him; but in that moment he saw a long white arm upraised and heard a familiar voice exclaim: "Heber, son of Nehum, it is Tirmar whom thou wouldst slay."

The young man's arm dropped to his side, and he settled back into his saddle.

"Tell me," continued the figure, "what business brings thee here at this hour of night."

"I am bound on an errand for the king," answered Heber.

"Traitor!" exclaimed the figure. "Thou, a Jew, carrying messages for the oppressor of thy people."

"I do it at my master's order," he replied.

"Thy master, indeed! A freeborn Jew of princely blood acknowledging a Babylonian his master!"

"Reproach me not, Tirmar. Thou knowest I bound myself to him because he took me in when I was homeless and thou also knowest what drove me from my father's house."

"Coward!" she exclaimed sneeringly, "blame everything upon a woman, of course. I did not tell thee to slay the man and thou knowest it."

"No Tirmar, but thou knowest full well it was my former love for thee that drove me to it."

"Former love?" she cried, her fierce sarcasm breaking down before that attack, an attack no woman could withstand.

"Yea, former love!" cried the youth passionately. "Thou

knowest Tirmar, I renounced thee and I have long since put away the love I once bore thee."

"Oh, Heber," she cried, "I little expected to hear such words from thee. Thou, for whom at this moment I would lay down my life. Yea, Heber, I would lay down upon this road and let thee ride over me with thy fiery steed, but that I now live for Judah and not for myself."

"For Judah?" he asked.

"For my people," she continued.

"Tell me thy meaning."

"I will and thou comest down from thy horse's back."

Heber dismounted and approached her. At that moment two men came suddenly out from the clump of palms and before the astonished youth could offer resistance his arms were tied behind his back. One of the men held him by the arm while the second laid hold of Saru's bridle.

"Tirmar, thou traitress, thou hast ruined me," cried Heber.

The tall Jewess made no reply but led the way through the grove and through a field of waving wheat to a small brick building in the center of the field. The horse was led around to the rear of the building and tied to a dead tree while Heber, still bound, was conducted to the door of the house. Tirmar gave two quick and three slow raps upon the door with a heavy stick she carried. The door instantly opened a trifle and a voice inquired in a whisper: "Who comes?"

"Open to Tirmar," was the answer.

The door was opened and the party entered the building. The apartment in which they stopped was entirely dark but Heber judged it to contain several persons, from the faint rustle of garments and suppressed breathing. After the door had been closed and securely fastened someone moved across the floor and in a moment the room became light. Heber gave a quick glance about the room and discovered a considerable company of Jews, many of them known to him.

"Whom have we here?" asked an old man, whose position on a raised dais denoted him the leader of the company.

"Heber, the son of Nehum, whose name has often been mentioned in our gatherings," answered Tirmar.

"Heber," said the old man, "thou art a Jew of noble birth and lineage and art therefore welcome to our meeting. We have heard of thee, however, as a wayward boy forsaking the religion of thine own people and bowing down to the images of the Babylonians.

"Nay, good Josedek," Heber answered, "I have dressed and acted as these men of Babylon but I am a worshiper of Jehovah."

"Thy statement brings joy to our heart," said the high priest.*

"These whom thou seest gathered together this night are men of Judah, wearied of their long captivity. We desire again to see our native land and to worship in the temple on Mount Moriah. We must meet in secret as spies are abroad. At a given signal we are to rise as one man, throw off the bondage of Babylon and return to our own land. The time to strike is the present. The old king is too indolent, the boy too young, to take the field at the head of an army. We have information also of dissatisfaction among the soldiery. Now is the time.

"One thing needful is lacking, a leader skilled in arms and familiar with the tactics of our enemies. Thou, O Heber, of all the Jews in Babylon, art most familiar with such matters. Long have we talked of thee and it seemeth providential my daughter should have found thee on this night when we hope to complete our plans. Now therefore Heber, on behalf of this company I offer thee the leadership of thy people. Wilt thou accept?"

Heber stood silent in the center of the room, regarding the old man's features fixedly. His arms were now free and he stood before them, tall and strong. The conspirators gazed

* Josedek was the son of the high priest Seraiah (who was slain by the king of Babylon in Riblah) and was carried to Babylon a captive. —Josephus 10:13.

upon him admiringly; all listened expectantly for his answer. Moments sped by and still he stood speechless, absently staring ahead of him. Finally he raised his eyes and made answer.

"O noble Josedek, and brethren of Judah. I am unable to answer so great a question on the moment. I must have time to consider well so important a step," he said. "I——"

Heber's reply was interrupted by a loud knock on the outside door. One of the company placed an inverted jar over the lamp and the room was again dark. Another tiptoed to the door and opened it slightly.

"Who comes here?" he asked.

"I would speak with one Josedek whom I am told resides here," answered a deep bass voice.

"Conduct him hither," commanded the high priest.

The man who had opened the door took the stranger by the arm and led him into the darkened room.

"Thou desirest to speak with me?" questioned Josedek.

"I desire to speak with one Josedek," repeated the newcomer.

"I am that man," replied the high priest.

"I have a pass that will make me known unto thee," said the stranger.

Josedek arose, stepped down from the dais and approached the man's side. The latter whispered a few words in the high priest's ear. Josedek returned to his station and one of the company removed the jar that obscured the light. The assembled company now beheld a short, stocky man dressed as a Hebrew merchant. Heber noted with surprise the well-known features of Rastagus the Mede.

"My friend," said Josedek, "thou canst now state thine errand without fear."

"Know then, good Josedek and men of Judah," began the stranger, "I am Rastagus, a Mede. I come as a messenger from Cyrus, king of Anshan, Media and Persia, Conqueror of the World. Listen while I deliver unto thee the message from the great king. No writing do I carry. Such a message as mine can only be intrusted to the human mind which no

man can read. Some thirty nights ago the king lay sleeping upon his royal couch. As he slept he dreamed and this is what the gods revealed unto him.

"Behold, as his eyes were closed in sleep there appeared before them a wondrous picture such as never man painted. The scene was one of desolation. Vast heaps of ruins lay scattered all about. Some great city had fallen. In the foreground lay the ruins of a magnificent building, the like of which is not to be found in Media or Babylon. Great blocks of marble lay scattered all about; some broken into pieces, others merely chipped and still others unbroken, square as when the quarryman finished his work.

"As the king lay gazing upon the wonderful scene it vanished and in its place there stood a great city, Babylon, encompassed by its mammoth walls. The great brazen gates were closed; but, as the sleeping king gazed upon them, they slowly opened of their own accord.

"He gazed toward Heaven and saw hanging over the city a small black cloud. Out of this cloud there came a voice as of thunder. Here is the message the God of Heaven gave unto the king:

"'Cyrus, king of Media and Persia, I have raised thee above all men. I have given thee mastery over the nations of the world. Not for thine own glory have I done this but for the furtherance of mine own plans. Listen now while I explain to thee the meaning of the pictures thou hast seen. The fallen city was My Holy City, Jerusalem, and the great building thou sawest in ruins was My temple, My dwelling-place. I raised up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who marched through My holy places and cast them down. My people, Israel, I delivered into their hands to be their servants and slaves. Lo, I hear the voice of My people calling unto Me out of a strange land. They are repentant and beseech Me to send them back to their own land.

"'Now, therefore, Cyrus, hear Me. Take thou thine armies, thy horsemen, thy spearmen, thy chariots and march upon that

great city, even Babylon. I will give the city into thy hands; without a blow shalt thou take it. I will deliver the king and the people into thy hands to be thy slaves.

“Thou shalt restore My people to their homes. Thou shalt send with them soldiers to protect them upon the march. Thou shalt give them tools, trowels and bars and hammers shalt thou give them; that My city and My temple may be rebuilt. The gold and silver vessels of My house which Nebuchadnezzar the king carried away thou shalt return unto My people. Thou hast heard the message: Obey!”

“Since that night the king has been meditating upon the message and when thy messenger arrived a few days later he hailed him as one sent from Heaven. This answer King Cyrus sends unto thee. He cannot come this year. Before his armies could get here winter would be upon us; but when the spring comes watch thou for him and his mighty army.”

“Thine answer is received,” said Josedek as the envoy finished speaking.

“The night is now far spent, brethren,” he continued. “Depart to thy homes and meet again tonight at the usual hour. Thou, noble Rastagus, I beg to be my guest for the remainder of thy stay here.”

One by one the company left the room, Heber among the first. The young man’s mind was troubled as he thought of the king’s undelivered message. The first streak of dawn was visible in the eastern sky as he emerged from the wheatfield leading Saru by the bridle.

The sun was two hours high when he galloped through the gateway of the palace at Borsippa and a moment later handed the tablet to Belibus. The lieutenant read the message and then, fixing his gaze upon Heber’s face, he said sternly:

“This message is dated the eighth day of Tammuz. Today is the ninth. Hast thou been since before midnight in covering so short a distance and mounted upon the fleetest horse in Babylon?”

The young Jew hung his head as he answered: "I was detained upon the road."

"This must be inquired into," said Belibus. "Soldiers, hold this man."

CHAPTER V

HEBER'S DECISION

Nabomuran was astir early the following morning, the ninth day of Tammuz. But one day intervened before the coronation day of Belshazzar and the soldier was to be marshal of the vast military pageant that would accompany the youthful prince from the palace to the temple. There was much to demand his attention during this day and an early start was essential to the success of his many duties.

Notwithstanding his early start, the wine shops in the market place were already doing a thriving business. Before one of the most pretentious shops, kept by an old Jew named Makeil, a small group of gay youths were standing, idly gossiping and discussing such persons passing the shop as were known to them.

"Ha," said one, Belesis by name, "who is this I see coming? Methinks the form is that of Nabomuran the soldier."

The eyes of the group turned upon the officer in a concentrated stare, impertinent but not devoid of friendliness.

"Thou art right," said a second.

"Where has he been these many months?" asked the third member of the group. "To Judea, the land of the Hebrews. The king thinking the sight of so splendid a body of troops as the Winged Lions might have a wholesome effect upon the people remaining in that country, sent them thither. They have been away now something over five months," answered another of the group, Iddin, son of the rab mag Vulmaran.

"We must give our old friend a royal welcome," said the last member of the group.

By this time Nabomuran's chariot was directly in front of the wine shop. Iddin hailed him and the soldier ordered his driver to stop.

"Come, Sir soldier," said Iddin, "allow us to welcome thee back to Babylon with a friendly cup."

"One cup only must it be then, Iddin. I have much on my mind this morning. Thou knowest I have a part to play to-morrow."

"Ah, yes," said Iddin, "tomorrow we shall have two kings. When Sheshbazzar appears to claim the throne we shall have three."

The other young men now stepped forward.

"Friend Nabomuran, we are pleased to see thee among us once more. Thine absence has seemed long to thy friends," said Belesis as if speaking for all.

"Come now for the one cup," said Iddin, after the others had greeted the soldier in turn.

The company passed into the wine shop and the old Jew hastened to place before them a flagon of wine and six silver goblets. Iddin arose, cup in hand and offered a pledge.

"To Bel, our master; to Nabonidos, our king; and to Nabomuran, our captain; Babylon's great trio."

All present drank the toast with gusto. Nabomuran, contrary to his remark concerning one cup, ordered a second round and rising as Iddin had, offered a pledge in return.

"To Babylon, our mistress; to Nitocris, our queen, and to all our black-eyed maidens."

The cups emptied, he handed the old Jew a bar of silver in payment, bade the young idlers farewell and reentered his chariot.

The gates of the palace were wide open at this hour and the chariot rolled through, straight to the main entrance. A servant at the porch received the captain's name and carried it to the king. Word was quickly returned bidding him enter at once. He found the king alone and pacing up and down the

room in great impatience. As soon as Nabomuran entered the monarch turned to him in anger.

"I wonder sir, at thy venturing into our presence this morning after having failed to carry out our orders," cried the king.

"What orders have I failed to carry out?" asked the soldier, astonished at his sovereign's ire.

"Where are the Winged Lions?"

"Safe in the old palace by this time."

"Hast thou been there to see?"

"Nay sir, I came directly here."

"Know then, Nabomuran, they have not arrived. There is treachery somewhere. I am the unhappiest of kings. I have not a man upon whom I can lean, upon whom I can depend to carry out my orders."

"Some harm must have befallen my messenger, sir," said the soldier, genuinely worried for Heber's safety.

"Whom sentest thou?"

"My Jewish servant, Heber," was the reply.

"A Jew!" cried the monarch angrily, "thou entrustedst a message of thy king's to a Jewish servant? I gave thee credit for better judgment, Nabomuran."

"The young man has always proven trustworthy before, sir, and I sent him having full confidence in his devotion."

"Perhaps I blamed thee wrongfully, but I am worried this morning. This Sheshbazzar matter has arisen to vex me and now come rumors of dissatisfaction among the soldiers. If my army desert me for this lost prince I am ruined. Nabomuran why am I hated by the people?"

"I know not, sir," replied the soldier.

"A courtier like Vulmaran would have told me I was not hated but loved; however, Nabomuran I admire thy truthfulness. Even if thou hadst given me a courtier's answer I would yet have known the truth. Tell me, how can I gain the love of my people?" The king was plainly distressed.

"That, sir, is a question I am unable to answer." Nabomuran might have suggested some ways in which the king could

relieve the burdens of his subjects, but he dared not trust the present mood too far.

"They misunderstand me," continued the king. "I strive to please them but my every effort is returned to me charged with hate. This farce we enact tomorrow is but to win the regard of the masses. I realize as well as thou, Nabomuran, how poor a king my son will make. He is my son and I love him as a father should, but I would the gods had endowed him with some of the qualities thou dost possess."

Nabomuran was silent, not knowing how to converse with the king in his present mood.

"I sometimes wish this Sheshbazzar would appear and claim my throne. I should then have something to live for; some object to attain. In seeking to bring about his defeat I might forget my personal unhappiness. Still there would be the risk of his being successful and unhappy king though I am, I yet desire to retain my throne."

"Is there not a likelihood of there being plenty of action in the near future? I am told we may expect a conflict with the Persians at any time. They are reputed to be wonderful soldiers and Cyrus is called a great general. I fear we will be hard pushed to defeat them," ventured the soldier.

"They may be all popular rumor makes them; but they cannot scale nor breach our walls. My ten years of work, building walls and digging canals is now at an end and they can come when they like. I allow myself no worry on account of the Persians. Enough of this, however. Forget my weakness, Nabomuran, but at times it eases my feelings to reveal them to someone I can trust. Go now and find thy men. Set them to their task of patrolling the streets as soon as they arrive."

An hour later Nabomuran reentered the king's presence and informed the monarch of his command's safe arrival. He had not questioned Heber but promised the king he would do so at once. Nabonidos then gave him some information (brought in by spies during the soldier's absence) concerning Heber's de-

lay, and with this hint Nabomuran felt himself able to lecture Heber intelligently.

After receiving instructions on the formation of the great parade of the morrow, he left the king's palace and was driven directly to the older building upon the opposite bank of the river now his headquarters.

He passed hurriedly through the halls of the old palace, going directly to the large central room he always used as his office when in the city. As soon as he was seated a servant was sent to find Belibus. The lieutenant came presently and seated himself near his superior.

"About this delay in reaching here this morning, Belibus. At what time did Heber reach Borsippa?"

"The sun was more than two hours high," replied Belibus.

"And Heber left my father's house nearly an hour before midnight. Did he offer any explanation?"

"None, sir."

"Can it be that Heber purposely delayed delivering my message?"

"I questioned him sir, but received no answer save that he had been delayed on the road. A visit to his lady may have been the cause. The black eyes of the Jewish maidens are enough to hinder the most trusty messenger in the king's service," said Belibus.

Nabomuran smiled, but did not contradict his lieutenant's assertion. Had not one pair of black eyes burned themselves into his very soul?

"I cannot allow this incident to pass without reprimanding Heber. Had the king's fears been well grounded disaster might have followed this neglect. Send the young man hither, Belibus, and post a guard at the door that we may not be interrupted," he said.

A few moments later the young Jew entered the room. With bowed head and sullen air he approached his master, his whole appearance that of a schoolboy going to receive his birching. Nabomuran arose and stood waiting for the servant, who was

also his friend, to reach him. The commander's face was stern, yet not hard. More of sadness than of anger was in his mind. The words he was about to speak were dictated by his sense of duty and came not from the heart.

"Heber," he began in a stern low voice, "I have loved thee as a brother. I have bestowed upon thee all the benefits within my power. I have trusted thee with mine own secrets. Nothing in my life has been hidden from thee. Thou art the only man in the world who has ever been my confidant. Yet Heber, what return hast thou made unto me? The first important work I have entrusted unto thee thou hast performed carelessly; I will not say treacherously, though the king so considers it. By thy act thou hast nearly destroyed my prestige with my king. I cannot let this pass unnoticed, Heber. I have orders to turn thee over to the king to be tried under serious charges, but for reasons unknown to thee I am going to risk the king's disfavor. Before I settle this matter, Heber, tell me: Canst thou offer an excuse for thy conduct?"

Heber was silent, his head bowed. What could he say? No excuse presented itself to his mind. Besides he had always been truthful and could not now change the principles of a lifetime; but he could not tell the truth.

"Master," he said finally, "I can tell thee nothing."

"Ah, Heber," said Nabomuran sadly, "I fear I have been disappointed in thee."

"Oh my master!" cried Heber, "if thou only knew!"

"Heber, I do know. Last night, while carrying a message for the king, thou wast stopped by a woman and conducted to the house of one Josedek in the center of a wheatfield. What took place there my informant knows not, but it was nearly daybreak when at last thou started to do the king's errand. Heber, I can forgive thee, but the king never will. His spies saw thee last night and he it was communicated this story to me. My influence with Nabonidos is great, but I fear for thy safety. Go, therefore, and seek a home among thy people to the south

and there remain until the king's anger shall have abated. Remember, Heber; stay not in Babylon. Now go, and may thy God go with thee."

With mingled feelings of anger and humiliation, the young Jew left his master's presence. He was angry with Nabomuran for his words of reproof, and humiliated that Nabonidos had received news of the conspiracy he was asked to lead, though in truth the monarch knew next to nothing. Both Nabonidos and Nabomuran believed Heber to have been engaged in an amatory adventure. At the moment Heber left the room, the decision to cast in his lot with his rebellious countrymen was made.

CHAPTER VI

A SOLDIER'S LOVE

The remainder of the day passed quickly to Nabomuran. He spent the time at his headquarters and was busy every moment. One by one the leaders of the arriving bands of soldiery reported to him, were assigned to their camping places and received instructions as to the part they were to take in the morrow's pageant. Late in the afternoon he found a few moments of leisure and retired to an inner apartment, opening off from his official room, to obtain a short rest. Earlier in the day he had sent servants to his home for such clothing and other baggage as he would need during his stay in the old palace, for he had decided to make his home with his men as long as the king feared danger.

Shortly after he lay down a servant called him, saying that a messenger awaited in the outer room to hand him a communication. The soldier arose hastily, threw a coat over his shoulders and went out into the large room. A Jew was the messenger, and this is the message he bore:

Nehum, to Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard:

Greeting:—

May the Lord bless thee and keep thee in all thy ways. At the house of thy servant this night, a few men of Judah are to be gathered. I should feel myself greatly honored if thou couldst add to our meeting by thy presence.

Nehum.

Below was added another message, evidently written by the same hand.

Accept my father's invitation. I wish to speak with thee.
Orma.

"Inform thy master he may expect me. Convey to him my thanks for his kind invitation," said Nabomuran.

The servant bowed and left the apartment. After his departure, Nabomuran returned to his private room and again lay down upon the couch. He made no attempt to find sleep but lay quietly upon his back, his arms crossed above his head and his brain active.

As he lay thus, thoughts of the Jewess came into his mind. Indeed they had been there continually since the two days passed in her presence, but as long as the king's business required his attention, he had kept them from diverting his mind from the work in hand. Now that he was for the moment free from duty, he lay back in ease and allowed blissful thoughts to roam at will through the fair gardens of his mind. If he shut his eyes for a moment, the white clad figure of Orma flitted before them; when his eyes were opened she was still present. He allowed his imagination full play, and it afforded him pleasure to dream of the only woman who had ever occupied his thoughts. Up to this moment he had not realized the place the dark-eyed Jewess had made for herself in his heart and mind.

Bred in a womanless home, the very name of his mother unknown to him; his early youth and manhood spent amid the

stern conditions of army life, little had the gentler sex entered into his thoughts. Not even the intrigues of his brother nobles and officers had held a place in his life. From boyhood he had lived purely, his virtue as unspotted as that of the Jewess herself. He lived a shining example of the truth that a man can live a pure life without thereby being the less a man.

From the moment when during the storm on the desert, the removal of the cloak from about Orma's head, had revealed to him her beautiful, refined features, a new influence began to work upon the lonely man of war. Heretofore such love as his heart contained was bestowed upon his father, the old priest, upon his country or his horse. Indeed, had he confessed the truth, it was probable that his affection for Saru would have been found to equal the others; excepting that in times of peril his love for Babylon was fanned into a brilliant flame which illuminated his whole being. Now he felt himself passing through a period of reconstruction. His every sense seemed expanding and he realized for the first time how bare his life had been, despite the honors received at the hands of his only mistress, Babylon.

Suddenly he became conscious of the flight of time. He sprang from the couch and hurried out into the large apartment. Two servants were lounging in the room. One he dispatched to the kitchen after his supper; the other he sent to the stables with a message for Susa the charioteer. During their absence he attired himself for the evening visit. Every portion of his dress of a military aspect was removed, and in its place he donned a simple, long white robe which hung from his shoulders and reached to his ankles, a style of garment only lately come into vogue among the Babylonians. His only indication of rank was a broad silken collar, richly embroidered, worn about his neck and over the robe. This was his official insignia as commander of the Winged Lions, an organization which combined a secret brotherhood with a military order.

The light supper disposed of, the soldier entered his chariot which awaited him at the palace entrance. From the old palace

to the residence of Nehum was a pleasant ride this cool summer evening. It was moreover a continual ovation for the soldier. His return to the city had been so recent that few among the masses had seen him or even heard of his being once more among them. The Borsipian road, inside the inner wall, was crowded with pedestrians, many of them soldiers accompanied by their fair ones—the latter rejoicing over their lovers' return—for from all parts of the empire bands of soldiery had come to assist in the celebration of Belshazzar's coronation. The city over everyone was given up to pleasure, save only the stately and dignified troopers of the Winged Lions, who slowly rode back and forth, one man on each of Babylon's fifty avenues.

Susa, at a signal from his master, stopped at the residence of Nehum. "I shall be within for some time. Drive up and down the road until I wish to return. Make thy trips short and do not lose sight of this house," said Nabomuran after he had alighted.

Susa bowed in silent acknowledgment of his orders. Nabomuran turned and walked rapidly up the pathway leading to Nehum's residence. He knocked loudly upon the jamb with his cane and in response to his summons Nehum himself came and gave his guest the heartiest of welcomes. The old man led the way down a long bare hall to a large room at the farther end. Here the soldier was presented to a dozen aged Jews, whose white locks and silvery beards betokened them patriarchs among their people. With hearty sincerity, coupled with quiet dignity, the soldier greeted each man as his name was called. At the name of the last member of the little assembly, he showed signs of surprise.

"The name of Daniel is not unknown to me," he said.

"Nor to me," replied the venerable prophet, "is Neboakhu's son a stranger."

"Thou knowest my father?"

"Ay, young man, thy father and I are old acquaintances. We were once both called in to interpret a dream for the old king and from that day we have been friends, though long

have I talked with him concerning the falseness of his worship," answered Daniel.

"Each man, noble sir, remains true to the faith he was born in," said the young man with some dignity.

"The errors of birth, my son, can be changed by every man," said the prophet smiling.

Nabomuran was too well bred to introduce an argument at such a time, especially upon the one subject which cannot be discussed without causing feeling. He therefore made no reply to Daniel's last speech, but accepted the seat Nehum offered him. He soon decided in his own mind that he had been invited here to listen to speeches setting forth the glories of the Hebrew religion; at least the conversation hinged upon that topic. If such had been Nehum's object he gave no indication of it, as he took little part in the conversation. Soon the topic changed to that of the expected deliverance of the Jews from captivity, and the prince became interested. He had already discussed this subject with Heber and knew of the hope held by the Jews. However, he was surprised when Daniel announced that it was foretold that their deliverance should come through a king named Cyrus. The news gave pain to the patriotic soldier, and for the first time he feared that calamity which was in store for his country.

When an opportune moment came he arose and made known his intention of departing, urging as his excuse his arduous duties of the morrow. As Nehum conducted him through the hall he found words to frame an inquiry that had been upon his tongue's end a dozen times.

"May I not have the pleasure of a word with thy daughter?" he asked.

The old man looked at him sharply for an instant before replying.

"Thou wilt find her in the garden, sir," he said finally.

"Here, Ruth, show this good man to thy mistress's bower," he called a moment later as he saw a little maid glide by before the house.

At the doorway Nehum grasped both his guest's hands and bade him an effusive farewell. The soldier followed the serving maid and the old man returned to his other guests.

The maiden led Nabomuran through a verdure-bordered path to a small rustic building in the center of the garden behind the house. She pointed out the bower and withdrew, leaving the soldier standing alone in the brilliant moonlight. He hesitated a moment, his eyes following the retreating form of little Ruth, vainly hoping that she would return and free him from entering yonder bower alone and unannounced. He watched until she had disappeared around the house, and then realized that he stood alone with the woman whom, he at last admitted to himself, he loved. He was irresolute, hardly daring to enter.

At length, mustering the required courage, he stepped forward and slowly pushed aside the luxuriant vines that screened the entrance to the bower. He stepped softly in. Upon a couch in the farther corner, made of palm wood and plaited rushes, reclined Orma. As the soldier entered she arose and advanced to meet him. Never had human being looked so beautiful to him. She was clad in a simple white robe that completely covered her form from throat to ankle, in sharp contrast to the robes of Babylonian women which hung from one shoulder, leaving bare the arms and breast. Her glossy black hair hung down her back, a wavy cloud that enhanced the soft lines of her beautiful face.

As she reached him she held out one tiny hand in welcome. Almost involuntarily the Babylonian dropped upon one knee and raised the hand to his lips. She hastily withdrew it and he arose, imagining he had given offence, but when she spoke he was reassured.

"Come," she said in a low sweet voice, "be seated. I have much to say to thee."

She returned to the rush divan, and he drew a small stool up beside her.

"It is of my brother I would speak," she began. "He was here this morning and though he would tell me nothing I mis-

trust a quarrel has taken place between thee and him. Tell me sir, I beg thee, all that has occurred. I must know."

Feeling himself under obligation to tell her, the soldier obeyed and related in a few words the occurrences of the previous night, closing with an account of the morning's interview with Heber.

"Tirmar again," said the girl as if speaking to herself.

"Thou must use thine influence with Heber to have him leave the city as I bade him," said Nabomuran.

"Alas, sir," she answered, "my influence will have little weight against Tirmar's."

"Surely Heber could not refuse his sister's request?"

"That depends sir, upon Tirmar's wishes. Should she desire Heber to remain here nothing I can say will move him. A sister's influence can never cope with a man's love for the woman of his heart."

"However," said the soldier, "he must not remain here. I ran considerable risk in not turning him over to the king and I cannot be still further endangered by his remaining here to be taken by the king's spies."

Nothing more was said for several moments, delicious moments for Nabomuran as he sat looking into the face of her he loved. As he sat there the thought came into his mind of how short a time he had known her but he did not marvel that those three days had brought love. At that moment it seemed to him as if they had been created for each other, had been gradually drawing near to one another until now was the supreme time. To his imagination it seemed as if she sat merely waiting for him to speak. In that moment came the decision to tell her of his love, though his sober sense told him it was too soon to thus declare himself. He leaned forward and, looking into her face, poured out his love. Orma, scarcely realizing his intentions, allowed him to finish, but in a moment she regretted it.

"Fair lady," he began, "I am a soldier. My life has been spent in the service of the king. When a small child I was

given to an officer to be trained in my duties, and from that day I have lived a soldier's life, a life of hardship and discipline. No thoughts of love or poetry have ennobled my soul. No woman has ever held a place in my life to soften my nature.

"When first I saw thee my heart underwent a change. From the first moment I found it pleasant to be near thee. In some manner, I cannot name it, thou art different from the women of mine own race. What no one of them could have done thou hast. Thou hast won my heart. Take a soldier's heart, sweet woman, and in its place thine own return. Smile on me and my soul is exalted. Wilt thou share a soldier's life and make it full of love and happiness?

"I have rank and wealth. Thou shalt be one of the foremost women of our land. Thy house shall be the gathering place of mighty men and beautiful women. The city shall be at thy feet. O, turn me not aside. Accept the love I offer and consent to share my hardships and my days of plenty, my sorrows and my joys, my trials and my honors."

The countenance of the Jewess underwent a change as the soldier poured forth his vehement words of love. At first she gazed upon him in admiration. She glanced at his pure and noble face, his erect manly form, his princely mien and in her heart a wave of love seemed rising to be poured forth upon the pleader; but, when he spoke of honors, thoughts of racial differences filled her mind. The Jewess would be despised, even though a noble's wife, and he, unable to lift her to his position, would himself be dragged down to hers and his love prove his ruin. Religion asserted itself. She thought of the man before her as a worshiper of stone images, his very name the monument of a false god. The fire of love, slowly fanned to a blaze by his eloquent appeal, now faded, drenched in the icy waters her mind gathered together. Yet she acknowledged she could love this man and when a woman acknowledges that to herself, the love is not far distant. She began her reply slowly and reluctantly.

"Noble sir," she said, "I esteem thee above all thy race; I

could love thee were that love worthy to give; but, think sir, I am a Jewess. Were I to wed with thee, thy honors would quickly tarnish. Thy people would never honor the husband of a Jewess. I am a captive. Were not my father a prince of Judah I should be a slave as many women of my race are. In my own land I would be thy equal but here I am thought unworthy to speak to thee. Think sir, of this and ask thy heart if it can make the sacrifice."

She said nothing of religious differences for fear he might resent any such reference. Nabomuran sat silent for several moments after she had finished speaking. Dimly it came over him that these fair words formed a refusal. He was inclined to speak more but now too late came the consciousness that he had spoken too soon. He told himself he should have waited a more respectable length of time. How could he expect to win her love in three days? In a moment, therefore, he decided to press her no further at this time.

"I accept this doom, if doom it is," he said quietly, "but remember my love is thine forever and I shall live in hope of someday winning thine in return."

He dropped suddenly upon one knee and grasping her hand imprinted a lingering kiss thereon, before she could withdraw it. He turned to go, but at the bower's entrance he stopped and, with a graceful gesture, said:

"Farewell my love. Whenever thou lettest thyself think on me let thy thoughts be kind ones. Again farewell."

"May the Almighty go with thee!" she cried.

He left her. As he stepped out onto the Borsipian road, he felt a heavy hand upon his shoulder and in another instant a ruffian had his hand upon the young man's throat. His arms were pinioned, his ankles bound, and before he could cry out or offer the least resistance, he was thrown upon the shoulders of his assailants and carried away.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST BLOW FOR ZION

With slow step and sullen air, Heber left the presence of his master at the close of their interview. Discordant feelings, love and hate arraigned, did battle within his breast. All love for the noble soldier who had taken him, an outcast, procured his pardon from the king and raised him to a position of equality with himself, could not be stifled in a moment. Even at this moment, when his will strove to overcome his love, his mind persisted in painting before his eyes scenes whose remembrance forbade feelings of hate to arise. Yet with a steadfast determination to cast his lot with his rebellious countrymen, he strove to conquer all feelings of love or kindness for his former master.

Gradually by forcing his mind away from unwelcome recollections of past kindnesses, the young Jew worked himself into the desired frame of mind. By the time he passed the inner wall and found himself traversing the Borsipian road he was sufficiently angry with his former benefactor to enable him to take up arms against him without compunction. Heber realized only too well that his acceptance of the proffered leadership involved a personal warfare against the kind soldier.

His present destination was his father's house. He thought of this as a safe refuge where he could make his headquarters and go and come as he saw fit without fear of detection. Mistaken youth, thou art a marked man. At this instant a young Greek, the most trusted assistant of Ulbar, chief spy of Babylon, was sauntering slowly along in Heber's wake. It was not until the young Jew turned into the path leading to his father's abode that the Greek, considering his walk to have led him far enough in that direction, slipped into a clump of bushes to await Heber's further action.

Heber passed around the house, through the garden, resplendent with gay blossoms whose fragrance filled the air, and

made his way straight towards the bower regarded in that household as Orma's exclusive retreat. Here he found the fairest flower in all the garden, his sister. She sat upon a low stool, a long white robe in her lap. By her side sat the little handmaiden, Ruth, who was her inseparable companion. She was idle, watching the play of her mistress's busy needle.

The interview between brother and sister proved a trying one for both. Orma's quick perception showed her that something was wrong with her brother and she tried with all the loving persuasion of a sister to win his confidence, but without avail. He was sullen and silent, refusing alike to answer pointed questions and veiled requests. At length as a last resort, Orma suddenly asked:

"Heber, hast thou seen Tirmar?"

"I have," he answered defiantly.

"Oh, my brother!" she cried, "for my sake and the sake of our dear father have nothing to do with that wild creature. Thou knowest how nearly she ruined thy life. O Heber, as thou lovest thy sister have nothing to do with her."

As she spoke she burst into tears. Heber arose from the couch and hastened across the bower to his sister's side. He took her in his arms and endeavored to pacify her.

"Come, come, little sister. Fear nothing for me. I will do nothing to cause thee pain."

Orma looked up smiling through her tears as the sun breaks through the dripping clouds after an August shower. She placed her soft cheek against her brother's bearded one and looking into his face she murmured softly: "Thank thee, darling brother."

He held her in his arms for some moments and then gently put her from him. Silence reigned for some few minutes afterward, Orma finally breaking it.

"How fares it with thy master?" she asked.

"Speak not to me of him!" exclaimed Heber.

"Why brother, what has happened?" she asked in a surprised tone.

"Ask me nothing. He and I have parted; that is all. Now farewell sister, I must leave thee," he said hurriedly.

Without another word he abruptly left her; sad and troubled. Throughout the remainder of the day her mind was filled with anxiety for this brother whose weakness she knew. It was not until afternoon when her father called her to indite a message to Nabomuran that she decided to learn the truth concerning Heber. Without reflection or thought of what might follow, she appended her message to her father's.

Upon reaching the road Heber turned toward the outer wall and walked slowly away in that direction. The young Greek emerged from his hiding place, looked cautiously round him and started trailing Heber. When Heber reached the group of palm trees he stopped and looked about him. The Greek slipped behind a tomb in time to avoid detection. Heber, satisfied that he was alone, stepped into the path leading through the wheat-field and walked rapidly toward the house of Josedek. The spy, assured of the young man's destination, deemed further shadowing unnecessary and strolled back toward the city.

Tirmar admitted Heber, but instead of conducting him to the room used by the conspirators, she led the way upstairs to a small apartment in the second story of the building. She closed the door of the room behind them, and secured it with a bronze hasp. Heber was astonished, not knowing what to expect. Tirmar, motioning him to a seat, herself remained standing by the door, her eyes fixed upon him. Her long gown hung from her left shoulder leaving bare her rounded arms, her high firm shoulders and one breast, while the robe fitted her so closely the whole contour of her form could be imagined.

Tirmar was a strange but beautiful creature; the spirit of a man in the body of a woman. In form and feature she was a very goddess; a most beautiful woman, from the crown of her shapely head covered with its long black tresses, to the sole of her sandaled feet. The beauty of Orma was like the silver radiance of the moon, which charms us with its quiet silvery light, while this creature was like the dazzling sun of noon-

tide. She was taller than the average man of her race, and built in true proportions. Her shoulders were broad though of beautiful contour, and her hips large. In both figure and bearing she was an Amazon.

She stood silent and motionless, her full dark eyes fixed upon Heber's face. They seemed to pierce him through and through. His eyes fell. He dare not look up and even when his gaze was fastened upon the floor at his feet, he seemed to feel their influence and behind them he felt the iron will of the woman. Before that will all his resolutions and promises vanished; he was completely within her power. He looked up nervously. She smiled; an entrancing, voluptuous smile.

"Heber," she said, realizing her victory, "art thou with us. Art thou willing to become thy people's leader; to rescue thy kinsmen from bondage and lead them back to Mount Zion?"

She paused expectantly. Heber sat with downcast eyes and made no response.

"Think, Heber," she continued. "Think of the possibilities before thee. Think of the honor and glory that awaits thee. Think, Heber! Thou wilt be a second Moses to thy people. In their gratitude they will make thee king. Think of that, Heber; think of that. Thou a king and Tirmar thy queen!"

She paused again, and again she searched him with those wonderful eyes. She felt herself the mistress of the situation, but she was still unsatisfied. He must be completely within her power. She made another appeal, this time humbling herself that her final victory should be the greater. She threw herself at the young man's feet and clasping his knees with her bare shapely arms, looked up into his face. Her great round eyes were filled with tears and her voice trembled; such was the intensity of her passion.

"Oh, my Heber!" she cried. "Turn not from me. Spurn me not. I think only of thy welfare and of the welfare of our people. It is because of my love for thee; that love no language can describe. I plan for thee, am ambitious for thee. Oh, think; think Heber! Decide at once! Say thou wilt lead

thy people! Think! Heber son of Nehum, sitting upon the throne of King David! Look not so sober, my loved one. Be joyful! Smile! Speak; speak to me Heber!"

The young man looked into the face of the beautiful creature before him. He was changed. Her appeal had softened his heart. He forgot the past, and thought only of the present. All remembrance of his former master, and even of his sister, was obliterated. He loved Tirmar! He would do as she desired him. He threw his arms about her neck and implanted a kiss, his first, upon her high white forehead. She smiled for joy, a smile that lighted up her fine face and seemingly lifted her to a higher spiritual level. Heber had never seen a being more beautiful. She loved him! There was joy in the thought.

Movements were heard in the room below. Tirmar arose and held out a hand to Heber.

"I will take the leadership," he said.

"Come then," she said, her face radiant.

Side by side they descended the brick stairway to the floor below and entered the apartment used as a meeting place by the conspirators. A much larger company than the one of the previous evening was gathered in the room. Josedek as before was the leader of the assemblage.

As the pair entered all eyes turned towards them. Josedek raised his huge shaggy eyebrows inquiringly at his daughter. Tirmar's answer was a slight nod. No word was spoken, but the high priest knew Heber had decided as they wished.

"Here friends," he called, "is the man chosen to lead us in our struggle for liberty. Here is the man who will lead us to victory over the hosts of proud Babylon; the man who will lead us home to Zion."

Heber was abashed for a moment, but for a moment only. He raised his head and gazed upon his compatriots. A sudden impulse seized the Jews as they looked upon their handsome young leader. They arose and thronged about him. They would have shouted but for the fear of making so great a noise. One by one they greeted him and resumed their seats. When

quiet and order were restored the assemblage proceeded at once to the business in hand.

"Now we have a leader, all that remains is to decide when and where to strike our first blow," said Josedek.

An old man arose.

"My friends," he began, "go slowly in this matter. Remember the power we attack is the greatest on earth. We must fight men whose whole life has been spent in war. They have the best weapons, the greatest generals, and in every way are our superiors. We had better wait until our friend King Cyrus arrives. Then we will throw open the gates and bid him enter. Take an old man's advice, my friends; be cautious, or all may be lost."

The old man had hardly finished speaking when a fierce looking Jew named Joram arose and answered him.

"This is no time to listen to old men and children," he shouted. "This work is for men to do. Now is the time to strike. I trust not the Persian. By accepting his help we would but change masters. Under our brave young leader we can carry all before us. I say now is the time to strike. Come, who will go with us? Zion or Death."

His last words were caught up and passed from mouth to mouth. "Zion or Death" became their slogan.

Tirmar arose.

"Tomorrow," she said, "is the coronation day. At night they will eat and drink and be merry. The whole city will be unarmed. Everyone from the king down will be drunken. Then is the time to strike."

Heber was the next to speak.

"There are reasons," he said, "why I would advise striking tonight. In the first place, our meetings are bound to be discovered sooner or later and we ought to strike a telling blow before the king receives warning. Tomorrow the people will be treated to a great sight, an imposing array of Babylon's magnificence. They will see their kings surrounded by nobles and soldiers. They will shout themselves hoarse and swear

eternal fealty to the present government. Tonight they hate their king for his oppressive taxation. Tomorrow night they will love him for giving them a holiday. If we strike a blow tonight and win even a slight success the people will rise and help us. Therefore am I in favor of making a start tonight."

His words struck a popular chord. Hot-headed as they were, most of them were impatient to begin their career of glory. It needed only a stalwart leader like Heber to fan the flame into a conflagration.

Even cautious Josedek, wise with the wisdom age brings, saw in Heber's words much to be commended. He knew full well the fickleness of the Babylonian people; how soon the memory of a dead monarch faded away before the intense enthusiasm called forth by his successor. He knew how impressionable they were and how the morrow's splendor would affect their minds.

"Our brave leader is right," said Josedek, breaking a short silence.

"Zion or Death, this night we will smite the lion. We will humble the pride of great Babylon," shouted Joram.

The signal knocks were heard upon the outside door and a moment later a tall young Jew entered the room. By this time it was evening and the light was burning. It was Addoni their trusted scout. He it was who brought them information concerning the actions of their prospective enemies.

"What news, friend?" asked Josedek.

"The king has some suspicion of our actions and will doubtless take steps to thwart us. Tonight but few troops are within the walls; by far the greater portion of those who have arrived are encamped without the walls. If we are to strike at all, we must strike at once, tonight. Some important point must be taken."

"Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard, is now at the residence of Nehum on the Borsipian road. I would recommend, my friends that he be taken prisoner, for a few days at least," said the scout.

Josedek glanced at Heber. He arose.

"Come friends," he said, "who will accompany me to my father's house and assist in the capture of this man?"

"I will," said Tirmar.

"And I," said Joram.

"I" and "I" said several more.

Heber chose ten persons, including Tirmar and Joram; but before they left upon their errand the matter of calling together their forces was discussed. At length it was decided that Josedek should issue a proclamation calling upon all true Jews to take up arms and assemble at the appointed gathering place. Several copies of the writing were to be made and each copy given to a trusty messenger who should go from man to man and read the summons.

As soon as this matter was settled Heber and his chosen band set out upon their errand. From the house in the wheatfield to the residence of Nehum was a short walk. The party hid themselves in the shrubbery before the house, there to await the soldier's coming. Heber delegated five of the number to watch for Nabomuran's chariot and take possession of it when it came along. Joram the fire-eater was appointed to command this band. Armed with clubs and spears, they passed along the side of the great thoroughfare, keeping well in the shadow. A trooper appeared, and all fell flat upon their faces until he had passed. They then resumed their journey.

The low rumble of the approaching chariot was heard. Joram waved his hand as a signal for his party to be quiet. He whispered to one of his band, who darted across the road, gaining the other side unseen. Nearer and nearer came the vehicle. Susa held the reins loosely in one hand, paying little heed to his walking horses. Possibly his mind was upon some maiden far away among his native mountains.

Suddenly he felt the reins jerk in his hands. He turned quickly, to see his horses thrown back upon their haunches. With a low cry of fear he dropped the reins and sprang over the side of the chariot, alighting squarely upon his feet. He

had hardly touched the pavement when he was seized and securely bound by one of the Jews. To cry out meant death so the frightened servant submitted in silence.

Meanwhile Heber, Tirmar and their three companions remained hidden beside the entrance to Nehum's house, awaiting the coming of Nabomuran. Soon they saw him, walking slowly down the path, his attitude one of great preoccupation. He passed his hidden assailants and walked straight to the edge of the road. He stopped and looked about for signs of his chariot.

The Jews darted from their hiding place. There was a brief struggle and then all was over. Nabomuran bound hand and foot, and too proud to cry out, was carried across the street to the group of palms. Here the Jews laid him on the ground while they awaited the coming of their companions. Three of them soon appeared, explaining that Joram and one other had driven the chariot to a place of safety. Nabomuran was thrown upon the shoulders of four vigorous young Jews and the little cavalcade set out upon their return. When their destination was reached, the four men carried their burden down into the basement of the building, and placed him in a small but strong cell. They loosened his bonds a trifle, just enough to prevent discomfort. Then they departed, fastening the huge timber door behind them, and leaving him alone in the inky darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CONFLICT

Heber's first care after reaching the rendezvous was to call a consultation of the leaders to formulate plans for the night's work. After relating the account of their success in capturing Nabomuran, he called up Tirmar, Joram and three others. These standing in a semi-circle about the dais of Josedek heard from their leader's lips the outline of his plan.

"Everything depends upon our blow being sudden and un-

expected. If an alarm is given and all the soldiers now within the city come to oppose us, our cause is lost for we can not yet cope against such numbers. I think our work for tonight would best be the capture of the old palace upon this side of the river. It is strong and large and can withstand a siege of long duration. It overlooks the river and the drawbridge, and commands the paths of communication between the two sides of the river. Once within our possession, it will become a fortress from which we can direct our future actions. With such a stronghold in our possession we can depend upon men flocking to our standard in numbers. Thus after a short time we can undertake greater achievements. Piece by piece the city shall become ours and then we can return to our native land."

"What shall we do with Babylon? If we defeat the king we will be masters of the city and must govern it some way," asked one of the council.

"There is living somewhere a man named Sheshbazzar who is the rightful king of Babylon. I hope his cause shall be joined to ours and when our combined forces have defeated the present king, we will return to rule Judea and leave Babylon to Sheshbazzar," answered Heber. Then he continued the outline of his plans.

"As is known to all," he said, "there are but three points at which the old palace can be attacked. They are the three stairways leading up to the great mound upon which the palace is built. One of these stairways faces the Borsipian road, the second faces the Sippara road and the third gives upon the river bank. I propose to divide our forces into three divisions, one to attack each stairway. The force inside the palace numbers fifty men, besides the servants. I propose taking three hundred men, one hundred in each column. It would be dangerous to take more, as we could never get through the inner wall with a larger force. Then we will be six to one and the Winged Lions are used only to fighting on horseback, never to my knowledge having defended a fortress against an attacking force.

Their leader also is not with them, a fact worth an hundred men to us."

"Joram," he continued, "thou art a boatman and shall therefore command the river column.

"Tirmar," he asked, "shalt thou go with us?"

"Indeed I shall," she answered.

"Then thou shalt command the division attacking the northern stairway. I will lead the third column. We will approach the palace with the greatest caution. Have thy columns arranged in single file and long drawn out. Do not allow any resemblance of an attacking force to exist and above all, do not let one of the Winged Lions see thee. There is but one man on a street. Do not therefore venture upon a street or across one until its guarding trooper shall have passed thee. When my horn sounds three blasts we will all attack at once. Attack suddenly and fiercely; all depends upon our being quick. Dost thou understand?"

"Perfectly," answered Tirmar and the rest nodded.

Heber now sent a man outside to learn what force had gathered in the wheatfield in answer to Josedek's proclamation. The emissary returned shortly reporting a considerable force in waiting.

"As many as three hundred?" asked Heber.

"Yea and thrice three hundred," answered the man.

"It is well," said the leader. "Are we ready for our attempt, my friends?"

Tirmar left the room, returning shortly a transformed person. Her long flowing hair was gathered upon her head and was lost to sight in a capacious helmet of polished bronze. Her long gown had given place to a short tunic that barely reached to the knees. A pair of leather leggings covered her nether limbs, save only a space of three inches that intervened between the tops of the leggings and the fringe of the tunic, thus leaving bare the knees. A broad leather belt about her waist supported a long, bone-handled dagger. The customary Babylonian

breastplate hung about her neck and in her hand she carried a heavy, shining sword.

"I am ready," she said.

"Then we will start at once and may God grant us success," said Heber.

"Amen," responded the company.

They now left the house and passed around to the rear where, half hidden in the luxuriant wheat, were the forces of Judah. Heber at once selected three hundred men, choosing the more stalwart and better armed. Dividing this band into three companies, he assigned to each the appointed leader. Then in a few low spoken words he exhorted them to caution and gave them directions as to their march. At the last moment Josedek came out and in a few whispered sentences invoked Divine blessing upon their endeavor.

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Two officers of the Winged Lions were indulging in a late stroll upon the broad platform supporting the building that was now used as a barrack. As they walked slowly toward the edge of the mound looking down upon the river, they were conversing in low, confidential tones. It was a few minutes past midnight and the change of troopers had just been made, fifty men coming in to rest and fifty going out to patrol the streets.

"What news from the party sent out in answer to the bugle call?" asked one, our old acquaintance Belibus, who had just come in from his tour of duty.

"They returned more than an hour ago," answered his companion, the gay trumpeter, Nergalshazzar. "The alarm was evidently a false one. A rider imagined he heard the sound of combat on the Borsipian road without the inner wall and sounded his trumpet, but no signs of any disturbance could be found. Yet I fear some trouble is afoot. Look above. The moon and stars that shone so clearly earlier in the night are now clouded, as if some deeds were to be done they wish not to

see. Our captain has not yet returned and it is past midnight. What if some harm has befallen him?"

"I have no fears for Nabomuran," answered Belibus. "He is probably worshiping at the feet of yon Jewess we rescued on the desert."

"Aha," said Nergalshazzar, "so the wind blows in that direction? Our own women have never tempted the captain, but thou thinkest the Jewess has won his well-guarded heart?"

"Perhaps not as bad as that, but it was evident he took a liking to the girl. She is beautiful, one must admit. Still I am surprised at the captain. Why, 'tis said he could wed royalty, were his eyes only open."

"What? Halista?"

"So the ladies of the court have thought."

"Nay, impossible," said the trumpeter, who had his own designs upon the king's beautiful niece.

"'Tis said she smiles upon our captain, but he seemeth proof against her charms."

"He may be a great soldier, and indeed he is, but his eyes are poor when he chooses the Jewess before the king's niece. However he leaves to others the opportunity of winning her."

"Nergalshazzar for instance?" said Belibus.

"Why not? 'Twere better far she should wed a poor but honorable soldier than a gay rake like Iddin the rab mag's son, upon whom 'tis said Nabonidos would bestow her," replied the trumpeter.

"Thou art right. Men like Iddin are unfit even to gaze upon such a woman as Halista."

"Methinks, Belibus, thou showest considerable warmth in that remark."

"Yes," answered Belibus, "I too have a liking for the fair princess."

"I suspected as much, friend Belibus. It will then be a race between us to see who wins her."

"Thou art likely to be the winner. I am of too poor and

unknown a family to dare even to look upon a princess," said Belibus sadly.

"Nay, nay, try it Belibus. Thy position is an honorable one. Some day thou wilt be commander of the troop and the king's trusty captain. Try it. Our zeal will be inspired if there is rivalry between us."

"Perhaps," was the answer, but the lieutenant shook his head sadly.

"Hark! What is that?" exclaimed the trumpeter.

They listened.

"It is nothing but a boat crossing the river. Thou art unduly nervous tonight, Nergalshazzar," said Belibus.

"I may be, but Belibus, I feel a strange presentiment of impending trouble," was the answer.

The sound of paddles was distinctly heard. A cry sounded faintly. Then all was silent, save for the muffled splashing of the paddles in the river.

"That boat is not crossing the river; it is ascending against the current," said the trumpeter. "Wait; I will go down to the landing and see what it is."

He ran down the broad steps, leaving Belibus standing above. Nergalshazzar hurried along the brick quay until he came to the next landing below the palace. Here he stepped inside a doorway where he was completely hidden, and awaited the coming of the craft whose presence on the river at this hour had made him suspicious. The steady splash of the paddles as they dipped into the river came nearer and nearer. Before the boat was visible other paddles were heard. The trumpeter hugged the dark wall and peered anxiously into the gloom. At length the faint form of an approaching boat became distinguishable. One after another the outlines of the figures of those in the boat became visible until the astonished soldier saw before him ten armed men. One, apparently the leader, stood in the prow eagerly scanning the landings as they passed them.

Nergalshazzar's mind was filled with conflicting thoughts.

What could this mean? The men in the boat he judged to be Jews and what business had a company of armed Jews upon the river at this hour? He deemed it time to report his discovery; therefore he slowly crept from his hiding place. Keeping well in the shadow of the high mound, he made his way back to the palace landing. Belibus stood at the head of the stairs awaiting his friend's return. The trumpeter ran up the steps and in a few hurried sentences reported what he had seen.

"Let us remain here and watch them," said Belibus.

The two soldiers remained standing beside the stairway peering out over the low rampart that encircled the mound. The first boat was now below them and even in the darkness they could make out the powerful form of Joram as he held up his right arm. The paddlers ceased their efforts; the helmsman gave a quick turn to the steering oar, and the prow of the boat scraped against the brick landing. Joram sprang out and held the boat firmly against the wall.

"They are landing here," said Belibus.

"One after another the Jews disembarked and formed in line at the foot of the stairs. The second boat arrived; its occupants landed and formed behind their comrades. Then the boat was pushed down stream by the man left in charge to make room for the third. Thus boat after boat came up, discharged its living cargo and dropped down to the next lower landing where they waited in case a retreat should be necessary.

"It is time to call the men," whispered Belibus. "Bid them come in haste, but caution them to make no sound. I will remain here and watch the movements of this strange company."

Nergalshazzar ran across the platform and entered the palace. From room to room he flew, rousing the sleeping soldiers as he went.

"Be silent," he commanded as he led a party of fifty men toward the stairs.

They walked slowly and noiselessly across the platform and

formed a solid band behind their lieutenant. Nergalshazzar carried two battle-axes, one of which he handed to Belibus.

"Wait until they reach the third step from the top. Then charge fiercely but without a shout," was the command whispered through the lines.

"We are undiscovered," whispered Joram after his command had landed and formed in ranks. "We will march nearly to the top of the stairs and at the signal from our leader's horn we will rush in and seize this side of the palace before the soldiers are alarmed."

They marched slowly up the steps, keeping in solid formation. Near the top they halted, each man grasping his weapon firmly and only awaiting the signal to rush in. A moment only they stood thus. Then it seemed as if an avalanche from a mountain side had been hurled upon their heads as the solid line of armed men rushed headlong upon them. Down, down, down, went the Jews before the fierce onslaught of the Winged Lions. The axes of the two leaders swung over the heads of the unfortunate Hebrews descending now and then upon the head of some luckless wretch. Cries of agony came from the foot of the stairway where those in the rear ranks were being trampled upon by their brethren retreating before the shining blades of the Babylonian battle-axes.

The spears and clubs of the Jews were child's playthings when pitted against the heavy weapons wielded by the iron arms of the muscular young troopers. The broad steps were slippery with Jewish blood as down toward the river the fierce soldiers forced their unfortunate enemies. The rear ranks broke and fled, leaving many of their comrades behind hopelessly wounded and trampled under foot.

"To the river," shouted Joram, who fighting like a tiger was slowly falling back, contesting every step with the valourous Belibus. The words were his last. The shining blade of the Babylonian officer descended upon the skull of the fierce Jew, cleaving it in twain. He fell dead at the soldier's feet.

The death of Joram was the signal for a wild and indescrib-

able panic. A frenzy of fear seized upon the survivors and they rushed, fell and stumbled down the steps in their mad haste to reach the river. In they plunged, notwithstanding that few of them could swim. The Winged Lions followed them down the steps and on to the landing. In the excitement of the moment reason left them; their fiery Chaldean blood surged through their veins, making of them very demons. The luckless Jews were slaughtered like sheep in a pen. No cries of mercy were heeded; the commands of Belibus availed nothing, and the death dealing battle-axes continued in their bloody career.

Belibus and Nergalshazzar, at the risk of their own lives, ran among the men commanding, imploring them to cease the useless effusion of blood. At length their fury abated and one by one they picked their way through the dead and wounded to the top of the mound. They formed in line that the officers might ascertain their losses. Mixed in among the dead Jews were the bodies of two troopers, while several of the men who lined up before Belibus had ghastly cuts.

They had hardly taken their places in line when, from the southern stairway, sounded three trumpet blasts. A moment later a servant came running to Belibus.

"Quick, sir!" he cried, "we are attacked at the other stairways."

CHAPTER IX

MAN TO MAN

Belibus hastily divided his band into two companies and sent one to the northern stairways under command of Nergalshazzar, while he led the other to the southern. The soldiers under Belibus reached the head of the southern stairway just as the Jews led by Heber gained the top. The Winged Lions charged them but, wearied by their previous encounter, their charge

lacked the needed impetuosity. The Jews stoutly held their ground and the attack rolled off from them harmlessly. Not an inch had the defenders gained. The battle became general; blow upon blow was exchanged, the heavy axes of the Babylonians crashing upon the palm wood spears and clubs of their opponents. While the Jews were inferiorly armed their freshness and superior numbers more than compensated, making it appear an equal contest. The Jews, though unable to gain the level mound, held their original position at the head of the stairs and the Winged Lions could not force them back down the stairway.

At the very beginning of the fight Belibus singled out Heber as his personal antagonist. Hatred of the young Jew for his treachery against Nabomuran—the man who had done so much for him—gave strength to the tired arm of Belibus. In arms and equipment as well as in youth and strength, the two men were about equal. But for the Babylonian's previous encounter with Joram, and his attempts to control the fiery troopers after the contest, his superior skill would have placed Heber at a disadvantage.

Both men fought with axes of almost the same pattern, save only that the handle of Heber's was a trifle the longer. For ten or fifteen minutes they hacked and dodged and parried. The stout wood handles of their weapons were cut and splintered, while a glancing blow had inflicted a superficial cut upon the right hand of Belibus. The fight thus far was on equal terms.

"I am tiring," thought Belibus. "I must push matters or else be beaten."

He took a step forward, his hand firmly grasping his weapon, his jaws set and a look of fierce determination upon his face. He raised his axe aloft and pressed against Heber, watching his antagonist closely the while. The young Jew experienced a moment of weakness and stepped back quickly to avoid the blow. He raised his axe but the guard was poor. He ducked his head to the right as he saw the blow coming. As he did

so his hand swerved a trifle, leaving an opening for his opponent. Belibus quickly saw his opportunity; his axe descended, appearing as if it would land directly upon the bare head of the Jew, but at this instant Heber took another backward step. His foot, planted directly in a pool of drying blood, slipped and down he went, prostrate before his antagonist. The terrible force of the Babylonian's blow spent itself in the air. The momentum caused him to lose his balance, and he fell across the breast of Heber. The active soldier, however, sprang up instantly, grasped the axe which had flown from his hand as he fell, and raised it aloft to dispatch his foe and thus end the contest.

"Vengeance is the king's," flashed into his mind.

"Wilt thou yield?" he asked.

"I yield," replied the humbled Heber.

"Then arise, go into the palace and on thine honor remain until I come. If thou enterest this fight again thy life shall pay for thy falsity."

Heber slowly arose and hobbled across the platform, (for in falling a ligament in his right ankle had been sprained.) Belibus stepped aside and watched him as long as his form was visible in the darkness.

Belibus returned to the still undecided fray. His presence was an inspiration to his comrades, who had exhibited signs of weakening before the continued onslaughts of the confident Jews. So intent had been the latter on their own individual contests that they had not observed their leader's defeat. The Winged Lions, taking on new life, made a desperate charge and forced their antagonists back a few feet. The advantage was only momentary, however, for reinforcements came up the stairway to the assistance of the Jews.

Faster and deadlier rained the blows from the Babylonian axes while fiercer and faster came the spear thrusts of the Hebrews. The outnumbered troopers were almost surrounded and the stout heart of Belibus sank as he saw defeat staring him in the face. The Jews noted with joy the advantages they

had won over their enemies and rushed forward with renewed vigor. Their ranks, constantly strengthened by fresh men from the rear, presented a solid front. Their long-handled spears, thrust well forward, kept the soldiers at a distance; for in order to reach a man the soldiers were first obliged to demolish his weapon. This placed them at a disadvantage and Belibus determined to change the conditions.

"Come men," he cried as he seized the ends of two spears in his left hand, holding them as in a vise while he rushed in and struck down their holders with two powerful blows from his heavy axe.

The men caught the idea and followed his example. The setting moon broke through the clouds and illuminated the scene, thereby greatly assisting the defenders. The conflict now became terrific; the troopers fighting for their lives; the Jews for freedom. The soldiers were striking as they had never struck before and now that they could clearly distinguish their opponents, the blows were delivered with telling accuracy. The carnage became frightful, the blood of Jew and Babylonian mingling in a ghastly rill and flowing down the steps. Hardly a man engaged but had a wound. Two troopers slowly and painfully dragged themselves from the scene, only to die before they could reach the palace. The fierce blows from the battle-axes were beginning to tell as one after another the Jews fell before them.

"Keep it up, men," cried Belibus, himself fighting as a fiend incarnate. His breastplate was cut and hacked almost to shreds; his helmet battered and bruised; his whole person covered with blood; but still he pressed forward. It was three to one against him—two spearmen and one swordsman opposing him—but his terrible blows, few missing their mark, kept his adversaries at a distance. Still the unengaged Jews in the rear pressed forward to their fellows' assistance. When one man fell another was ready to step into his place, thus keeping the line intact. Because of the fresh men constantly entering

the conflict it seemed probable the final victory would go to the undisciplined Jews.

Forward and back swayed the opposing line. Scarcely fifteen men blocked the way between the Hebrews and their goal but seemingly those fifteen possessed charmed lives. Belibus, at the extreme left, was fighting the fight of his life—though his present proud position had been won by personal valor alone—the strength of a god seeming to possess him. Even the Jews could but admire the prowess of the man, but still they pressed him, the three now increased to five.

“If Nabomuran were only here,” thought Belibus.

An ugly looking Jew stood directly before him. He was armed with a long sword which he wielded savagely. Belibus dodged the blows or caught them on his axe, while he returned them with interest, but only his wonderful nerve kept his weary muscles at work. He felt that even this must soon give way before the terrible strain, but before that happened he was determined to win the conflict or die where he stood. With a desperate rush he bore down upon the ugly Jew and aimed a fierce blow at his head. The blow, well aimed and well delivered, struck the man dead at his feet, but the blow seemed the last the brave lieutenant would strike for his king, for at this moment the four remaining antagonists completely surrounded him and death and defeat seemed imminent.

A commotion took place among the rear ranks of the Jews. They were forced apart to allow a tall white-clad figure, armed with a huge battle-axe, to pass through them. The figure neared Belibus, reaching his side at the critical moment of the contest. A terrible blow from the newcomer's weapon struck down a Jew who was on the point of thrusting his spear into the lieutenant's unguarded side. The white-clad figure was Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard.

Inspired by his presence and aided by his fresh arm the Winged Lions made a last desperate rush upon their enemies. Slowly the Jews gave way before the impetuous charge. Down, down, the now confident troopers pushed them, until at length

the line broke and the survivors fled precipitately down the steps. Too late! Drawn up at the foot of the stairway, in instant readiness for service stood a regiment of the king's best spearmen. Rank upon rank stretched away from the foot of the stairway, their forms barely distinguishable in the faint light. Caught in a trap the weary Jews laid down their arms and suffered themselves to be bound and led away to prison. The worn out troopers left this work to the fresh troops. The winners of the conflict walked slowly across the platform to the palace, carrying their wounded comrades with them.

As they passed through the arched portal of the palace into the great hall that ran the entire length of the building, a similar party entered at the opposite end. They also carried some wounded comrades. Catching sight of this band, Nabomuran and Belibus hurried forward to meet them.

"How went matters at the north?" asked the commander.

"We were entirely successful," replied a soldier, "but I fear our victory is won at the cost of our brave trumpeter's life."

A look of dismay and sorrow came over the commander's face upon receipt of this intelligence. He bent low over the form of his beloved subordinate, placed his ear close to the wounded man's breast and listened.

"He is alive," he cried. "Bring him into my apartment at once. One man call Kudur and another take the best horse in the stables and ride to the temple. Summon hither my father to attend the wounds of our friend."

Two soldiers hastened to obey their commander's orders. Nabomuran led the way to his own room. The soldiers tenderly deposited their burden upon the captain's couch. While they awaited the coming of those sent for to care for the trumpeter's wounds, Nabomuran listened to a recital of the night's events. Belibus related the incidents connected with the fight at the river stairs and at the south stairs, while a soldier told of events taken part in by the band under the unfortunate Nergalshazzar.

The fight at the northern stairway while lasting as long as

that at the south had been less disastrous to the Winged Lions, as regarded the number of killed and wounded, but should the troop lose its popular trumpeter, they would consider the victory won at great cost. According to the soldier's account Nergalshazzar engaged in a personal encounter with the leader of the band opposing his. The engagement was both long and furious, the extreme quickness and dexterity of the Jewess enabling her to escape the soldier's terrific blows. At length, however, an opportune blow, striking full upon her bronze helmet and glancing to her forehead inflicted a severe cut. This brought her to her knees, and placed her entirely at the Babylonian's mercy. As she fell, her helmet dropped from her head and rolled upon the pavement. This accident, causing her long hair to fall, disclosed her sex. With all the soldier's inborn reverence for womankind, he gallantly stepped aside and allowed her to rise. The treacherous Jewess accepted her life at his hands but upon regaining her feet, she rewarded his courtesy by plunging a sword deep into his unguarded side. He turned to strike at the murderess, but her blow had been truly aimed. He dropped slowly to his knees and then fell forward upon his face, apparently dead. In the excitement Tirmar slipped through and behind her company. After this the engagement was brief. The Winged Lions, maddened by Tirmar's base deed, fought like demons, and in a few moments the Jews broke and fled, leaving many dead and wounded behind them. Tirmar, however, escaped.

What dire news the surviving Jews carried back to the house in the wheatfield. Of the three hundred men who started out to fight for Judah, scarcely fifty found their way back. The remainder were either dead or, what might prove worse, prisoners. Of the three leaders, Joram was slain, his body drifting down the Euphrates toward the sea; Heber, a prisoner destined for the dungeons beneath the king's palace; and Tirmar, a fugitive.

Thus ended the Jewish attempt to work out their own salvation. Thus God did thwart the plans of His chosen people that

His own plans might not be interfered with. Thus He showed the Jews their destinies were in His hands and He alone could give them freedom.

CHAPTER X

THE RESCUE

Actuated by a sudden impulse Orma followed Nabomuran as he walked slowly down the path leading from her father's house to the street. She had therefore been a witness of his capture. Even in the darkness she recognized her brother and his evil genius, Tirmar. The feelings engendered by the scene were conflicting. Her great and natural love for her brother forbade her condemning him too severely; but, on the other hand, the deep admiration and respect she had for the handsome Babylonian raised within her a desire to help him if she could. Although thoroughly a woman, in the highest sense of the name, there was yet in her makeup that quality peculiar to man which lauds and demands a fair fight upon equal terms. The unfairness of the attack she had witnessed affronted that inborn feeling and she could but feel less respect for the brother who had won the unequal contest than for the lover who had lost it.

Thus preyed upon by conflicting emotions she retraced her steps to her bower. Her faithful little attendant who had been at her side watching the conflict, followed her. It was now past the hour of her retirement, but knowing full well sleep would not come at her bidding, she still remained in the garden. She lay for several moments upon the couch, her arms folded and her head buried within them. Her long hair was in the wildest confusion, yet a confusion that enhanced rather than detracted from her beauty. Suddenly she raised her head and called to Ruth. The little maiden hastened to her side.

"Thou sawest the captain taken prisoner?" she asked.

"I did," was the reply.

"Didst thou notice whither they carried him? In the excitement I did not see."

"They carried him across the road and waited for another party. Then they set off toward the outer wall."

"Couldst thou follow them?"

"I think so."

"Then go and see what they do with their prisoner. See where they put him. Go! Run! Oh, Ruth, hurry! A new shawl will I give thee if thou wilt only bring me news of him."

Orma watched the little maid as she ran across the garden. Then she turned and threw herself upon the couch.

"What can I do?" she moaned. "If I assist the captain I will call down vengeance upon my brother's head. Heber! Heber! Why wilt thou be perverse? Oh, my brother, my brother."

A step upon the hard path without aroused her. She arose and hastened to see who might be approaching at this hour. Coming up the walk, with slow step and bowed head was Nehum, her father. The old man seemed downcast; his hands were clasped behind his back and his eyes were fixed upon the ground before him.

As the old man neared his daughter's retreat he raised his eyes. Her white dress outlined against the dark background showed him her presence and he gave a joyous exclamation.

"Ah, my daughter, is that thee? I was sleepless and came out into the garden thinking a walk might do me good."

"Come into the bower, father. I wish to speak to thee. To converse together may relieve both our minds," she said.

Orma led the old man to the couch. She placed a low stool at his feet and seated herself thereon. She folded her arms upon his knees and looked up into his face with sweet love. Her father placed one hand upon her glossy hair and lovingly stroked it. The soldier was forgotten in the homage her heart bestowed upon her father. Since the death of the wife and mother, father and daughter had been daily growing more dear

to each other. It was pure attachment of parent and child, the highest type of love possessed by man, a love kindled and kept ever burning by the payment of mutual kindnesses and attentions. Thus looking up into her father's benign countenance she revealed unto him all that was passing in her mind.

"When I wrote thy invitation to the captain I added an invitation for myself. I wished to speak with him concerning Heber. At my request he told me all. He sent Heber with a message of the king's, but the message failed to arrive on time. Heber was stopped by Tirmar and led to her father's house. The captain did not seem to know, father, but we know that our misguided countrymen meet there to plan their wild schemes of rebellion. I fear Heber is leagued with them. Oh, father, if they carry out their intentions and fail, our poor boy's life will be in danger; not even the captain's intervention could save him," she said.

"My boy! My poor misguided boy!" cried the old man.

"Did the soldier have aught further to say?" he asked after a moment.

"Nothing more concerning Heber," she replied, somewhat embarrassed.

"What then did he say?"

She slipped one hand confidingly within his broad palm.

"He told me he—he—loved—me." She spoke the words slowly and almost in a whisper as one who makes a dreaded confession.

Her father was silent. In the darkness she could not see the expression of his countenance, but she feared he was displeased. He waited some moments before speaking.

"To know thee is to love thee, daughter," he said tenderly, "and I can but feel pride that a mighty captain, standing high in the king's service should thus honor a child of mine. Yet, the noblest of his race though he appears unto me, he is an idolater. He is still the worshiper of stone images, his father the head of a false religion. My child, didst thou accept his love?"

"Nay father. I spoke of the barriers between us, but he made no reply. He only became thoughtful; troubled."

"Dost thou love him, dear one?"

She was silent. Her foot tapped the hard floor nervously; tears came into her eyes and her lips quivered. The old man awaited patiently the answer but he more than half suspected. Her silence showed her suffering. The hand he passed over her brow returned to him moist. As he thought of the struggle going on at his feet, his love for his daughter grew to fever heat. He felt that never before had he fully appreciated this blessing God had bestowed upon him.

She looked up suddenly.

"Father," she said, "I cannot deny the truth I hope to overcome. I love the soldier next to thee. He seemeth so noble, so grand. His actions are manly; his words are words of wisdom; his character is pure and high. His purposes in life seem commendable; he is devoted to his king and to his country. He is, as thou sayest, a worshiper of idols but there may yet come to him a revelation; he may yet feel the lack of that comfort we know of. Father, is it wrong for me to love him? Am I false to my God in feeling affection for an idolater?"

Nehum was silent as he pondered well the questions she put to him.

"Daughter," he said finally, "thy happiness and welfare are dearer to me than aught else on earth. Whatever troubles thee troubles me; whatever pleases thee pleases me. I would not hastily answer the questions thou puttest to me. Let us both think closely on the matter; let us ask our Father to guide us and to Him leave the decision. He worketh all things well. Those who trust in God, who let Him decide their earthly matters for them always triumph over their difficulties. It is best to say nothing more of the matter. If the captain's love is as strong as the man's nature bids me believe, he will await thy final decision, though years and troubles intervene.

"Aside from thy religious differences I have no objections to

this man becoming thy husband, but it is against my belief that thou shouldst wed an idolater. Let Jehovah be thy constant guide. Lean upon Him and at His feet lay thy every trial. He will decide all for thy best good. Now daughter, I will leave thee. I feel better for our little talk."

After advising her to seek her couch soon, he arose, kissed her lovingly and departed. Orma resumed her previous recumbent position upon the couch in the bower and lay quietly awaiting Ruth's return. The moments drifted by; she felt her eyelids growing heavier and heavier. Finally nature asserted itself and she dropped into a peaceful slumber. She was awakened by feeling Ruth's hands upon her shoulders. Throwing off her drowsiness she arose.

"What news bringest thou?" she asked impatiently.

"They carried the soldier to the house of Josedek and confined him beneath it. Vast throngs of armed men were gathered about the house and I feared to go near, so I hid myself in the wheat and watched. While I lay there I heard low talking, and then three columns of men marched away. The others dispersed and soon I was bold enough to approach the house. There is but one man left on guard, and him I know. Can we not undo the door and let the captain out?"

This suggestion had not before entered Orma's mind. After sending Ruth to find his prison she had thought of what she could do to aid him, but nothing had suggested itself to her. Now for fear her sober second thought would forbid such action, she hastened to do as the little maid suggested.

"Lead thou the way, Ruth. We will do what we can," she said.

Ruth guided her straight to the house of Josedek. In the edge of the wheat they halted to listen and to ascertain what opposition remained. The young sentry was still on guard, pacing slowly up and down before the cellar entrance. He seemed fully awake to his duty. Orma's heart sank as she saw no chance of his deserting his post. On the very threshold of

the soldier's prison she seemed defeated. Then the ready wit of her little maid came to the rescue.

"Wait," she whispered, "I will persuade him to leave for a moment."

Advancing to the very edge of the cleared space surrounding the house, she called softly, "Mada."

The sentry heard and stopped abruptly. Again the girl spake his name. He looked in all directions, vainly endeavoring to see through the darkness. As she repeated his name the third time Ruth advanced toward him.

"O Ruth, is it thee?" he asked as he recognized her.

Orma could hear nothing more that passed between them, but in a moment she heard their steps as Ruth led the sentry away from the door. Allowing them time to get out of hearing, she crept from her hiding place, hurried across the intervening space and groped her way to the building. Upon reaching the door she found it to be securely fastened by a heavy bar of palm wood. She grasped the bar with both hands and tugged, tugged till the blood mounted to her head, but to no avail. Undaunted, she placed her shoulder beneath the bar and firmly bracing her feet for a final effort, lifted with every atom of strength in her body. The bar gave way and, with a crash that to her excited sensibilities seemed terrific, fell at her feet. The door flew open and she passed through into the inky blackness of the cellar. She stopped to listen, hoping some sound from the prisoner might guide her to his cell. She was not disappointed. In a voice muffled by the partitions Nabomuran was calling upon his gods to rescue him.

She groped her way toward the sound, and feeling her way along the damp walls, came to the door of his cell. A simple bronze hasp was its only fastening. It yielded to her touch; the door swung slowly open and she found herself upon the threshold of her lover's prison. Now for the first time she realized the step she had taken, the position she was in. She could feel the blood mounting to her brow, but she controlled her embarrassment, thankful that it was dark.

"Captain," she called softly.

"What voice is that? It sounds like sweet music on mine ear," came a voice from the darkness.

"It is I, Orma the daughter of Nehum," she answered.

"As if that voice could be unknown to me," he said.

"Art thou bound?" she asked.

"My cords are loosed sufficiently for me to walk."

"Then come, sir, come quickly. The guard is absent for a moment and thou must be well away from here ere he returns."

He obeyed in silence and together they groped their way out into the open air. Ruth was playing her part well—the guard had not returned.

"How can I ever repay thee for thine act this night?" said the soldier bending over her.

"Speak not of pay but for thy safety's sake leave this spot. See, here is the guard's battle-axe. Take it, sever thy cords and go I beseech thee."

"But—" began the soldier.

"Not another word," she said commandingly.

Realizing her wisdom, he took the axe, cut the cords that bound his ankles and, snatching her hand before she realized his intentions, imprinted thereon a passionate kiss.

"Thine action gives me hope," he murmured.

"Nay!" she cried, "what I have done for thee I would have done for another in like strait."

The soldier smiled at her mild falsehood. He waved her another kiss, ran across the cleared space and disappeared in the wheat.

Nabomuran hurried toward the city. As he neared the old palace he heard the sounds of conflict and quickened his pace. He was bewildered by the night's events, and knew not how far reaching this rebellion might be. A trooper galloped by. Nabomuran hailed him and inquired the meaning of the noise.

"I know not," replied the man. "I have only this moment heard it and am riding to find the cause."

"Go thou and bid a regiment of foot come to the palace with

all haste. I know not the meaning of this commotion but it is best to be prepared for anything."

The trooper turned and rode away to carry out his commander's orders. He had proceeded scarcely three blocks before he met a regiment en route for the scene of conflict. Some member of the troop had heard of the engagement and acting on his own responsibility, had hastened to summon assistance. To the foresight of this unknown man the Jews owed their final defeat.

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Nabomuran stood sadly beside his couch gazing down into the white, drawn features of his beloved trumpeter. Kudur, the chief of the servants attached to the Winged Lions, was a surgeon of no mean order as surgeons went in those days. He used every method known to him to stanch the blood that flowed from the trumpeter's ghastly wound; but all without avail. The sword of the treacherous Jewess had penetrated too deeply.

Neboakhu, (who in addition to his priestly office was termed the best surgeon in the land) came at his son's request, but the distance he had to traverse made him slow to reach the palace. He undid the bandages that Kudur had applied and complimented the Susianian upon his work. He looked at the wound carefully and then, turning to his companions, he said quietly: "No human skill can save him."

Tears came into the eyes of the soldiers at this announcement. With the possible exception of Nabomuran the trumpeter was the most popular member of the troop. Neboakhu continued his ministrations but nothing he could do would stop the flow of blood. At length, giving up all hope the priest arose and left the couch, Nabomuran following.

A movement in the group about the couch attracted their attention and both men moved across the room to the sufferer's side. Nergalshazzar showed some signs of life. Indeed as they reached his side his eyes opened and his lips moved. The priest leaned over to catch whatever word he might speak.

"Belibus," murmured the dying man.

The lieutenant approached the bedside at a signal from Neboakhu and knelt beside his comrade.

"Tell Halista—my last—thoughts were of—her.—Win—her—my—Belibus—and—may—the—gods—bless thee. For—give that—Jew—ess—as—freely as—I—forgive—her. I—am—dying. It—is—well. —I shall—not—see the—usur—per—mount the—throne. May curses—rest—upon the—head of Nabon—idos—and——"

Here the broken utterance ceased. Belibus remained beside the couch intently listening for some further word from his friend. Neboakhu poured a small quantity of wine down the dying man's throat. He opened his eyes and again his lips moved.

"The captain," he murmured.

Nabomuran succeeded his subordinate at the bedside. Nergalshazzar placed his hand in that of his superior.

"Farewell. May—the—gods—bless—and—honor thee."

Again he stopped. Nabomuran arose and the priest took his place. A moment later he arose.

"It is over," he said solemnly.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT PROCESSION

The tenth day of June, five hundred and thirty-nine years before the opening of the Christian era was eminently suited by nature for celebrating so momentous an event as the coronation of a new king in Babylon the Magnificent. When, but an hour after the weary troopers of the Winged Lions had retired to secure what rest the lateness of the hour permitted, the sun's glorious orb appeared above the city's mammoth wall and its first rays rested upon the golden roof of the beautiful temple, it was apparent the gods were to smile upon the new

king for one day at least. In ancient augury the propitious weather of his coronation day gave promise of a successful reign for the youthful prince.

The luxurious inhabitants of the Golden City were usually late risers but this custom was broken upon the morning now so auspiciously opened. By eight o'clock the streets began to take on a holiday appearance.

Imagine standing in a sheltered vantage spot upon that great thoroughfare so often mentioned in these pages. Our station is just inside the inner wall where we can watch the coming throngs as they hurry toward the center of the city. See! Here they come. Here comes a group of gaily attired children conducted by a decorous old female slave. Running, playing, shouting, laughing they skip along. Heirs of some noble old house they are no doubt. A group of adults follow, Babylonians also, their dark faces lighted up with expectancy. Following them come two aged Jews, walking slowly with bowed heads and solemn mien. They seem sorrowful. Perhaps their boys perished by the river side last night or are now prisoners in the dark dungeons beneath the Euphrates.

The people crowd by faster than we can recognize them. All the nations of the East are represented. Here is a Susianian, his thick lips and swarthy countenance forming a striking contrast with his gown of spotless white linen. Behind walks a Greek, a tall handsome fellow whose long strides and graceful carriage denote an athlete. The people about regard him curiously but he hurries along unconscious of their stares. Next we see a Phoenician merchant and his retinue. His ship is even now moored at the port to the south where slaves are unloading his precious silks and spices. His rich habiliments and important air bespeak him a man of consequence. A company of Arabs files through the gateway, on foot, their horses left outside the gate. At their head walks their youthful sheik; perhaps we may see him again in the future.

Why tarry here in idleness longer when we should be securing our position for viewing the great parade? We join the on-

rushing multitude and are borne onward. Whither it goes we must go. We are barely able as we hurry by to notice the houses beside our way. Gay banners and streamers fly in the gentle morning breeze. Every house has its decorations to show the patriotism of its owner. For the one day at least all are loyal. We cannot stay to witness the beauty of the trimmings, but are hurried along faster than we wish, but we care not. All are in good nature this morning. At last the rushing tide deposits us in the market place before the wine shop of old Makeil. We stop and seek refreshment.

Old Makeil is busy. His regular patrons and many new ones demand his attention. For the day he has impressed the services of a dozen black-eyed Jewish maidens who, clad in simple white gowns, flit about among the tables ministering to the wants of the thirsty throngs. At a table near the street sit Belesis, Iddin and their comrades, their time divided between gazing upon the passing throngs and inflicting lewd jests upon the unsuspecting maidens.

"A gallant fight the Winged Lions made last night," said Iddin, to introduce a new topic.

"What fight is that?" asked a companion.

"Hast thou then not heard? A band of Jews suddenly and without warning attacked the old palace where the Winged Lions are lodged. It was a desperate encounter but the soldiers were victorious in the end. I fear our troop of which we are so proud will make but a sorry appearance to-day. Many of the men were wounded and those who escaped unhurt must be nearly exhausted."

"Were many killed?" asked one.

"Several, I know not how many. The greatest casualty was the death of Nergalshazzar."

"Alas!" exclaimed several of the group.

"He was one of the finest of men," said Belesis. "It is indeed a pity he should be killed at the very beginning of a brilliant career. I have heard he aspired to the hand of Halista."

"Perhaps it is well for Belshazzar that the trumpeter was killed at this time," remarked one of the group.

"Why?" asked several at once.

"It is rumored the handsome trumpeter was none other than Sheshbazzar, the claimant of the throne about whom so much is said of late."

"Nonsense," said Iddin decidedly, "Nergalshazzar's parentage is unknown, I admit, but I have heard it stated his presence on earth was due to his mother's worship of Beltis."

A hearty laugh greeted this remark. Children resulting from this peculiar worship were no rarity in Babylon.

"As to this Sheshbazzar, I sometimes think no such man exists," added Iddin.

"For the sake of peace let us hope thou art right," said Belesis.

The street was now densely packed with people awaiting the coming of the great procession. The young noblemen settled with Makeil, and left the shop. They pushed their way through the throng toward the junction of the market place and the temple street. Here a gigantic triumphal arch had been erected. Upon the arch's summit seats had been arranged for the ladies and it was this attraction that drew the gay youths toward the arch. Pushing, crowding, elbowing they forced their way through the crowd. The attendants at the entrance recognized them and they were allowed to mount the winding stairs that led up through one leg of the arch to its summit. They emerged in the midst of a literal bower of beauty. Here were gathered all the noble maids and matrons of the Golden City. All? No, for the foremost woman of the land was missing. Nitocris, queen of Babylon had failed to make her appearance and occupy the beautiful throne erected for her upon the edge of the arch's summit. Her place was supplied by the popular and beautiful Halista, the king's niece. Here, surrounded by a group of male and female admirers, noble men and beautiful women, she sat as a queen.

The slender lines of girlhood had but given place to the

more rounded figure of young womanhood. It was her rarely beautiful face that was her chief attraction, a face denoting the inner purity of a noble soul which even life in a corrupt court had failed to taint. Her eyes, so black, so beautiful, that seemed to rest so quietly upon the face of whomever she conversed with, could on occasion flash fire. With all her innocence and frankness there was drawn about Halista a magic circle within which none dared step. Never during her whole life had one approached her with aught but feelings of respect.

She was attired as befitted royalty. A long loose gown of the purest silk descended to her feet. The straps over her shoulders were likewise of silk, interwoven with threads of gold and silver. They were profusely embroidered with gold and trimmed with the fairest of pearls. A necklace of the same gems encircled her snowy neck while a tiara of gold set with pearls and precious stones adorned the glossy, raven-hued hair that graced her noble head.

It was toward this beautiful woman that Iddin, the rab mag's son, made his way. She turned at his approach and, while apparently welcoming him, there was too little deception in her character to enable her to fully disguise the loathing she felt for the man. The dullest bystander could plainly see the rab mag's son was no favorite with the king's niece.

"Ha," said the youth, "I behold a younger and handsomer queen than I expected to find."

"Younger only," replied the princess. "Queen Nitocris has no rival in beauty." She spoke sharply, making no attempt to disguise her abhorrence of his flattery.

"Our queen is ill to-day, I fear," continued Iddin.

"I know not. She only announced her intention of remaining at the palace." As she spoke she leaned over and gazed down upon the crowd below.

A faint sound of music floated up to them. The people below heard it.

"Here it comes," was the cry passed down the line.

Slowly and with stately tread the head of the procession

approached the arch. All on the summit leaned forward, expectant, anxious to behold every detail. Soon the first ranks were beneath them. What an ocean of melody floated up to the fair onlookers! The band that led the vast pageant was the grandest ever seen or heard in Babylon. It was composed of three hundred men, divided into ten ranks of thirty men each. At the head marched the leader, carrying a simple wand of palm wood, tipped at either extremity with a silver ornament and which he waved from side to side to keep the players in time. Following closely upon the leader was a platoon of thirty drummers pounding upon their diminutive instruments with their finger tips and knuckles. Their time was perfect, each player in absolute unison with his neighbor.

The second rank of musicians carried an instrument called a dulcimer which was fastened to the player by a strap passing around his waist. The instrument consisted of a wooden frame over which ten strings of varying size were stretched. Each player beat upon the dulcimer with a small metal hammer carried in the right hand, while with his left hand he fingered the strings. Notwithstanding the utter dissimilarity of the drums and dulcimers their music was by no means displeasing to the ear, accentuated as it was by the cymbals of the third platoon.

The fourth and fifth platoons followed at a considerable distance, possibly for harmony's sake, the sweet tones of the single and double pipes being liable to suffer from the din preceding them. The five remaining platoons were composed of players upon various forms of string instruments such as harps and lyres. Thus the new king was preceded by the most remarkable band of musicians the world of that day could furnish. The harmony existing between the various styles of instruments was surprising, the tones of drum, dulcimer, cymbal, pipe and harp floating up to the women in one vast rolling wave of soul-inspiring melody. Even the saddest heart among them could but be warmed by the subtle influence of the stirring music.

It was not until the last musician had passed beneath the arch that Halista raised her eyes to behold the next attraction of the

parade. The loud cheers of the populace drew attention to it. Halista looked up in time to gaze full upon the person of Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard. The young chieftain was mounted upon his beloved Saru who pranced and curvetted in the very height of equine pride. Nabomuran was simply clad. His dress and arms were only those his rank required. He glanced up at the arch and as his eye rested upon Halista, he lifted his helmet gracefully and made a profound bow. A smile came over the sweet features of the king's niece and she bowed slightly in acknowledgment of the soldier's courtesy.

Immediately following their commander rode the first battalion of the Winged Lions, two platoons of fifteen men each. Their appearance was in keeping with their fame. They were fully armed, their polished helmets glistening in the sun. Their bows and quivers were strapped upon their backs and in their hands they carried long spears surmounted by bright bronze heads. Their horses were decorated in the most sumptuous manner, their headgears, breast straps and saddle cloths all embroidered lavishly. The troopers were the heroes of the day. The events of the preceding night were rapidly becoming known and the people received the victors with loud acclamations. The carriage of the soldiers was perfect. They sat straight and rigid upon their horses, restraining and guiding their steeds with the left hand while the right held the spear aloft.

The troopers passed through the arch, wheeling into columns of five in order to do so. Then the next following body became the object of interest. This was a company of spearmen divided into four ranks of twenty-five men each. Silently and decorously they marched along, looking neither to the right nor the left. Their soldierly bearing called forth fresh cheers from the spectators. A hundred bowmen followed and then the hushed expectancy of the multitude proclaimed the approach of some new object of interest. In an instant the quiet gave way to loud bursts of applause as six milk-white horses, gay in their costly trappings, came into view. They stepped softly as if realizing their proud position. The golden trimmings of their

harnesses glistened and shone; the tinkle of the tiny bridle bells made sweet music upon the air. The attendants, one for each pair of horses, marched on the left. From between the leaders projected the end of the jointed chariot pole, carved into a semblance of a lion's head. The crossbar was also carved and was adorned with trimmings of gilt. Then came the chariot itself, literally covered with gold, its heavy wheels rumbling upon the hard pavement. The charioteer, tall and muscular held the lines firmly in his grasp. He looked neither to the right nor left, his gaze fixed upon his mettlesome chargers. Behind him, clad in all the magnificence man could imagine, his precious head shielded from the sun's rays by a huge gorgeous umbrella, stood Nabonidos, king of Babylon. To-day an expression of mingled pride and satisfaction displaced the usual look of languor and effeminacy upon the monarch's face. From the moment his chariot had passed through the palace gates he had received an ovation sufficient to gratify the most exacting tyrant. He bowed to either side as he rode along, seeking to gain the hearts of his subjects by his graciousness. The day was planned for this purpose and the king was determined to achieve his object. He too uncovered, removing his golden helmet, and bowed to the beauty bower above his head.

A second chariot followed that of Nabonidos. It was an exact duplicate of the first, horses, harness, attendants and all. Belshazzar, the youthful occupant, elicited as much enthusiasm as his father. If anything the ovation given him was the greater. The people shouted themselves hoarse in his honor, striving to make known their allegiance. Belshazzar's face wore a proud smile as he bowed in acknowledgment of their shouts. While the king had worn a helmet of beaten gold, inlaid with gems, his son stood bareheaded in token of his present uncrowned state. His long dark locks hung loosely about his shoulders. The boy's usually dull face was lighted up with an expression of joy and pride, transforming him for the moment into a man and a king.

As the young prince was about to pass beneath the arch a

beautiful surprise was sprung in his honor. Like the arch and all pertaining to it, this was the conception of Queen Nitocris. At the moment Belshazzar's chariot passed into the arch numerous small windows all over the building were opened and from each a tiny maid, clothed in white gauze, was lowered by a slave. The silken ropes that sustained them, while of sufficient strength to prevent accident, were so slight as to be practically invisible to the throngs below. The effect of this apparition was beautiful in the extreme. Belshazzar glanced up and a smile of pleasure overspread his features. As he looked up a shower of the most beautiful flowers came pouring down upon him and the tiny elves chanted a chorus of welcome to the accompaniment of harps played by unseen hands within the arch.

The people were so impressed with the beautiful spectacle that they gazed in silence. To them it really looked as if the children were floating in space. Immediately after Belshazzar had passed the children were slowly drawn up toward the windows and finally disappeared within the building. Following the chariot of the prince came the duplicate of the guard preceding his father, only in reversed order. First came the bowmen, then the spearmen and then the second battalion of the Winged Lions.

The applause called forth by Nabomuran and the first battalion of his command only slightly exceeded that given Belibus and the second. The lieutenant was the hero of the previous night's fight and his appearance elicited storms of applause, his name being called among the cheers. The second battalion was an exact duplicate of the first.

From the arch there now stretched away as far as the eye could see, a long line of gaudy chariots, two abreast, drawn by stout and gaily caparisoned horses. They contained the nobles of the court; the high officers of the empire. So long was this portion of the procession that it would have proved tedious to the spectators but for the pleasure of naming the individuals as they passed. The first brace of chariots contained Vulmaran, chief councillor of the empire and Neboakhu, chief priest of

Bel. It was usually acknowledged that the latter ranked next the king but as a matter of etiquette the rab mag was placed upon a level with him.

Rank after rank they passed, vehicles and men replendent in all the magnificence known to their day. The brilliant colors of the men's apparel and the brightness of their armor gave to this portion of the parade a kaleidoscopic effect beautiful to behold. However, too much brilliance is tiring to the eyes and it was a relief to the throngs when the last chariot rattled past and the first ranks of white-robed priests came into view. Clad in their flowing robes, their degrees shown by the number of flounces upon their skirts, they filed slowly by, their long lines reaching completely across the broad street.

The last line of priests at length passed through the arch and the last but largest division came into view. In platoons of twenty-four men abreast they reached far into the distance. This was Babylon's army, spearmen, bowmen and horsemen.

Thus ended the greatest pageant of ancient times.

CHAPTER XII

THE BLESSING OF THE GODS

Of all the wonders ancient writers ascribe to the Chaldean capital first and foremost stands the great temple of Bel. Built in eight stages one placed above another, its golden roofed summit was several hundred feet above the surrounding grounds. Notwithstanding the destruction by conquerors and devastation of the elements, the ruins of this wonderful edifice are to-day more than six hundred feet long and nearly an hundred and fifty in height. To this temple we now repair to witness the ceremony of coronation.

Long before the last platoon of the great procession reached the arch, the foremost ranks arrived at the base of the temple. Musicians, troopers and footmen all wheeled off to the west to

make their way back to the various camping places. Only a select few could witness the ceremonies in the shrine. The first man to enter the temple enclosure was Nabomuran who rode through the great bronze gates, leaving his battalion to make its way back to the old palace without a leader. He remained alone while two bodies of soldiery following the Winged Lions came up and wheeled off to the west. Then the gates opened to admit the chariots of Nabonidos and Belshazzar. Nabomuran instantly dismounted and advanced bareheaded to meet them. The king appeared weary but he received the soldier most graciously.

"All is successful thus far," he said.

"The gods smile upon our new king," said the soldier, nodding at Belshazzar.

"It augurs for me a prosperous reign," exclaimed the boy joyously.

"The gods grant it," said Nabomuran solemnly.

He had felt strangely oppressed throughout the celebration thus far. Some mysterious power seemed to hold him in its grasp. Instead of being joyous when all about him were celebrating, he had been sad. As a lover of his nation he felt all connected with the day to be a mistake, but in addition to that feeling he had a strange presentiment that he personally would have reason to regret the prince's elevation.

Soon the gates again opened, this time to admit the chariots of Vulmaran and Neboakhu. Close behind them came those of the king's councillors, six in number. Another wait and then the first of the long lines of white-robed priests reached the temple. After the last priest had entered the enclosure the soldiers on guard shut and barred the great gates. No more of the ceremony was to be seen by the populace.

A procession was quickly formed, led by eight priests playing upon harps. Following them were eight singing priests. Naboakhu came next carrying a golden censer filled with burning incense whose aromatic smoke floated back over the heads of those following him. Then came Nabonidos with Belshazzar

but a foot behind him. Vulmaran and the council followed Belshazzar, and Nabomuran brought up the rear. The line formed, the priests struck up a solemn chant and with slow steps they began the laborious ascent of the temple.

Round and round the huge pile of masonry wound the procession, moving slowly and solemnly, yet ever mounting higher. All heads were bowed. Their sandaled feet made no sound upon the hard brick pavement of the inclined plane. Only the sweet tones of the harps, the sleepy chanting of the priests and the soft tinkle of the golden chains holding Neboakhu's swinging censer, broke the stillness. The deep solemnity of the occasion made an impression upon the minds of all, a mingled expression of awe and veneration covering their faces.

Just half way from the pavement to the shrine they stopped while Neboakhu and Belshazzar entered a small chapel to make a sacrifice unto the gods. The innocent life of a sucking kid was offered up upon the golden altar that its pure blood might win the valued smiles of Merodach for the new king. Nearly a half-hour was thus consumed, a tedious time of waiting for those without the chapel. At length the pair emerged and took their former places in the company. They again mounted slowly, solemnly, preceded by the monotonous music and sweet incense.

Onward, upward in gradually decreasing circles they toiled until at last they halted upon the broad level platform of the topmost stage, before the entrance to the wonderful golden roofed shrine. They stood some moments before entering this Sanctum Sanctorum of Chaldean religion. The panorama spread out at their feet was well worth the long and tiresome climb to behold.

Off to the northwest stretched the great plain, now used as a camp for the vast bodies of soldiery attendant upon the ceremonies of the coronation. As the members of Belshazzar's retinue looked down they could see a long line of troops, the rear of the great procession, from this height appearing as a single black mark, marching toward the camp. Thin vapory

columns of smoke rising from all parts of the vast plain bespoke the approaching dinner hour. An army of cooks was engaged in roasting fat bullocks for the feasting of the troops.

Away toward the south stretched the long straight streets of the Golden City, lined on either side with stately buildings, beautiful gardens and occasionally fields of waving grain. Far beyond in the distance rose the comparatively low rampart of the inner wall, while still farther away the enormous outer wall reared its stupendous bulk as a vast artificial mountain. The glimmer of the noonday sun upon the placid waters of the great reservoir glanced up at them, a dazzling sight. The tall trees of the wonderful Hanging Gardens cast a slight shade over one portion of the glittering expanse of water. West of the temple the imprisoned Euphrates flowed silently but swiftly between its sombre banks of burnt brick, drawn irresistibly onward toward its final destination. On either side of the great river rose the walls and towers of the palaces, the one occupied by the royal household and the other by the king's guard. Babylon from this height seemed indeed a golden city, bathed as it was in the yellow rays of the noonday sun.

The participants in the coronation ceremonies had but a moment to enjoy the rarely beautiful scene beneath them. Neboakhu, who had entered the shrine the moment they reached the summit, now returned and with a wave of his long right arm motioned them to enter.

Two priests held back the heavy and costly draperies that screened the entrance and the company filed in. The sight within the shrine was one of greatest grandeur and magnificence. Gold was used lavishly in the decoration of this wonderful place of worship. It glistened from every portion of the room. Even the nails that fastened the boards of the polished floor to the timbers, had golden heads. The walls on three sides were hung with the richest draperies the world produced. They were hung from golden rods while long tassels of gold cord adorned their tops. The climax of Oriental magnificence was reached in the ceiling. This was a mosaic of incalculable

value composed entirely of precious stones set in patterns. Agates, beryls, sards, amethysts and in fact all the stones known at that day were mingled in a grand scintillating mass of ever-changing color. In the very center of the ceiling, in a setting of pure gold, was the pride of the collection, the Indian stone, as it was called. It was undoubtedly a diamond of rare weight and beauty. It was the only specimen known in the city and was greatly valued by the people, who assigned to it many wonderful powers and bestowed upon it several poetical names, such as the Eye of Bel.

Directly across the shrine from the entrance door, heavy curtains hid the eastern portion of the interior from the present company. Directly in front of the curtains was a huge golden table, forty feet long and fifteen broad, upon which stood two beautiful drinking cups of pure gold, each weighing thirty talents. Between the table and the curtains extended a railing of gold, the middle section removable to permit the entrance of such privileged persons as were allowed within the hidden space.

Neboakhu approached the table with slow step and solemn air, his head bowed and his hands crossed before him. At his command Belshazzar removed his sandals. The young prince was now entirely in the hands of the chief priest and must obey his every order. He approached the table and knelt beside it. The chief priest took a small goblet of pure gold and of finest workmanship and, after dipping it into one of the mammoth vessels upon the table, handed it to Belshazzar who drank its contents slowly and reverently. The great solemnity and grandeur of the ceremonies he was about to pass through awed the lad and lifted his soul above the level of personal pride and vanity upon which he had been living throughout the earlier portion of the day.

"My son," said the old priest solemnly, "thou hast now drunk of the sacred wine of the temple, which is to purify the thoughts of thy mind and fitly prepare thy heart for the solemn ceremonies thou art about to pass through. Arise and follow me."

One of the lesser priests removed the section of railing and

unseen hands opened the curtain sufficiently to permit the entrance of the priest and Belshazzar. Immediately they were closed again, separating the remainder of the company from the pair. The hidden mysteries were now to be revealed to the boy. For at least half an hour they remained shut in behind the curtains. Finally the draperies were slowly pushed aside, revealing to the entire company the contents of the Inner Chamber.

Upon a raised platform at the rear of the curtained space stood three golden statues, all of heroic size. The central figure towered above its neighbors and was of finer workmanship, as was its due, for the colossal form of gold was the earthly representation of the great god, Bel or Belus, in whose honor this vast pile of masonry had been raised. To him of all other deities the people of the Golden City gave their allegiance. The other statues represented, the one on the right Bel's consort Beltis, and the one on the left Ishtar, who corresponds to the Venus of the Greeks.

On either side of the great figure of Beltis stood an immense golden lion and next each lion a serpent of solid silver raised its ugly head. Directly beside each image stood a golden bowl and upon each end of the raised platform stood an enormous golden censer. Both the latter were now filled with burning incense whose perfumed smoke filled the confined space almost to suffocation.

Kneeling upon a golden stool directly before the statue of Bel was Belshazzar, not yet king but about to be anointed. While he remained in this position his father, Nabonidos, approached bareheaded and barefooted and with eyes uplifted to the face of Bel, made the following declaration:

"I, Nabonidos, servant of Bel and Merodach and by their favor king of Babylon, do in this sacred place and in the presence of these witnesses affirm and declare: That I willingly and joyfully bestow upon this, my well-beloved son, Belshazzar, the half of my kingdom and my throne. In so doing I solemnly adjure him to always reverence the great gods, by whose favor our

kingdom is great; to rule with justice, punishing all who disobey his mandates, yet showing mercy unto all who deserve it; to guard well the treasures of the temple; to defend the land against our foes; to uphold and protect the people, remembering always that his great honor is also his great responsibility."

Nabonidos then stepped back a few feet. Acting under the chief priest's orders Belshazzar now arose and approached the great statue of Bel. Claspings the feet of the image with both arms, he rested his head thereon. Thus prostrate before his god he was in due position to be made king, but before being anointed it was necessary that he make oath to properly perform his duties. Therefore Neboakhu told him the oath, phrase by phrase, the boy repeating each after the priest.

"I, Belshazzar, son of Nabonidos king of Babylon, prostrated before my master Bel, lord of heaven and earth, do now make solemn oath.

"As king of Babylon I will give devotion to the great gods and command my people to do likewise. I will honor and support the priesthood; guard well the treasures of the temple; heed the advice of my counsellors; sustain schools for the instruction of the people; punish the wicked and reward the just.

"I will always recognize and obey the commands of the gods. I will repair and build temples, causing sacrifice to be made at all times to satisfy the gods.

"I will defend the land against foreign foes and domestic traitors. I will maintain an army to defend our land and will honor its officers as our defenders."

All this and much more after the same style the youth willingly swore to. The oath administered, all that remained was the anointing, crowning and blessing. Neboakhu held aloft over his head a golden cup holding a small quantity of perfumed oil, which had remained beside the image of Bel for eight and forty hours that the god might bless it and render it potent. He slowly turned the cup until the liquid was upon the very

edge. Then as the oil ran over and trickled down upon the lad's head, he repeated:

"With this pure oil I anoint thee king of Babylon."

Now lifting a golden chaplet set with gems, the priest pressed it down upon the prince's head, exclaiming as he did so:

"Arise, O King, and do thine homage to Bel who gives thee power."

Belshazzar arose and prostrated himself thrice before the idol. He then stood upright with folded arms waiting to receive the final blessing from the chief priest. With that blessing the ceremony would be completed and Belshazzar would be ready to receive the homage of his people. Neboakhu stood beside the image of Bel motionless, looking into space. Seconds drifted into minutes and still the old priest remained silent. It was becoming painful, oppressive. Nabonidos, thinking the old man had forgotten his part at length said:

"It is now thy duty as chief priest to give the blessing of the gods to the new king."

The venerable chief priest, tall and majestic at all times, drew himself to his fullest height and with arms folded across his breast, gazed resolutely and fearlessly into his monarch's face. He spoke in low, stern tones, as he said:

"I cannot."

"Thou refusest unto my son the blessing of the gods?" exclaimed Nabonidos, too surprised for the moment to be angry.

"I refuse," answered the priest.

"What reason hast thou for such action?" asked the king.

"Because," said the priest, pointing dramatically to Belshazzar, "thy son is not the lawful occupant of the Babylonish throne. Sheshbazzar, the son of the murdered Evil-Merodach lives and is now grown to manhood. He is by birth entitled to reign as our king and upon him only can the blessing descend."

The king turned ghastly white and clutched at the golden railing for support. Again he was a victim of his terrible misgivings, which had been with him from the moment he decided to raise his son to the kingly rank. Sheshbazzar! The name

was a terror unto him and had been throughout all the years of his reign. Now to hear from the lips of so powerful a man as Neboakhu that this dreaded rival lived, seemed a knell to all his ambitions. Against the priest, for the time being at least, he felt no enmity. Always the most superstitious of men, Nabonidos feared this man as he feared no other on earth. Neboakhu, from his long years of study had become an adept at that magic so universally respected throughout the East. Nabonidos could not for a moment entertain thoughts of revenge against this powerful priest whose bidding the very elements seemed to obey.

The old priest's rebellion brought consternation to another beside the king. Nabomuran, standing well to the rear of the company, heard his father's words and instantly there came into his mind the story related by Rastagus upon the desert and the vow then made. Tumultuous thoughts struggled within the young man's mind. To be faithful to his vow meant rebellion to his king and Nabonidos had always been kind to him. Yet his venerable father whom he loved and revered had refused to acknowledge Belshazzar, and should he fear to follow in that noble man's footsteps?

Belshazzar, bewildered, stood looking absently first at his father and then at the priest. The boy knew not the meaning of the act. Even the noblemen, the privy council, stood as men spell-bound, not knowing what to say or do. Vulmaran alone had presence of mind.

"What matters it, O King, if an old man, the weight of whose years has already turned his brain, crosses thee?" he said. "See, my sword is here. Say but the word and the blood of the doting priest shall be a fit sacrifice with which to welcome a new king."

Neboakhu looked upon the bully, a contemptuous smile upon his thin expressive lips. The power of the will behind that glance momentarily silenced the rab mag.

"As chief priest of Bel, I command all to leave this place!" cried the old man.

His commanding manner awed them for a moment and involuntarily all took a step backward. That was sufficient. The great curtains swiftly but noiselessly slid along the golden rods, separating the priest from the company. The nobles, ashamed of their weakness, grasped their swords and sprang forward, Vulmaran in the lead. The moment the rab mag stepped within the curtains he gave a scream of anguish and fell to the floor. Another nobleman took him by the arm to raise him, and he too screamed. The rest hesitated and stopped. The unseen priest had called to his aid a mighty power whose existence was known only to him and died with him to remain buried for centuries. Only, years afterward, some priests in the temple removed a copper plate that was embedded in the floor just inside the curtains and found beneath it some curious apparatus connected to the plate by rods of copper.

One by one the nobles advanced and bowed upon their knees before Belshazzar, swearing allegiance unto him. All save one! One member of the party stayed not to do homage. In the confusion Nabomuran had slipped out and hurried away. Soon the entire party left the shrine and began their long descent.

CHAPTER XIII

THE INAUGURAL BANQUET

It is indeed unfortunate that the ruthless destruction of conquerors and the fury of the elements have left us so few remains of Babylon's magnificent palaces. With what joy would the student walk through their stately halls and apartments, feeling himself in the presence of the great men and women who, twenty-five centuries ago, lived here in the flesh. In treading their pavements one could almost see Nebuchadnezzar and his beautiful queen Amytis; in imagination he would see Daniel standing in the great reception room explaining to the con-

queror his dreams, the Chaldeans standing impotently by, gazing at the youthful Hebrew with jealous eyes. One could look out of a window and in his imagination see in the garden below Babylon's great ruler crawling upon all fours, nibbling at the grass and shrubbery. One could visit the great banquet hall and seem to see an uncanny hand as it moved slowly across the wall, tracing words of fate, words whose terrible meaning came true within the hour.

Isaiah foretold that "the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah," and the accounts of modern explorers prove the message of the old prophet to have been inspired. Babylon is literally "heaps" and such excavating as has been done fails to throw much light upon the buildings of the Golden City. From the accounts handed down to us by the Jewish and Greek writers, however, we may believe the palaces to have been magnificent, particularly the one used as a royal residence at the time of our tale. With this as a foundation stone, it is left to the romancer to erect thereon a building of his own creation, but fancy is at best a poor substitute for fact.

The day just closing, the one supreme day in the life of Belshazzar the boy king of Babylon, was to witness one more event in the coronation ceremonies, the great banquet in the palace. Drunkenness and lasciviousness, twin vices, sons of Death, were this night to hold sway. The two evils, not the two kings, were sovereigns this night, and not in the palace alone but throughout the city, for the great banquet would have an hundred imitations in buildings less pretentious. When Babylon celebrated all else was forgotten and from king to slave all rolled in revelry.

For several days past vast preparations had been in progress, all having as an object the filling of noble stomachs. An immense retinue had been engaged in preparing all manners of food and drink. Quantities of game and fruit had been arriving in the city for two or three days past. All varieties of

beast, bird and fish to be found in or near the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris were on hand in prodigal abundance. Large skin bottles of grape wine brought all the way from the sunny slopes of Armenia were piled high in the vaults beneath the palace. All butchering and dressing had been done without the city walls and the meat delivered at the palace kitchens ready for the fire.

One entire corner of the building was given up to the culinary department of the royal establishment. Here an army of cooks, bakers and confectioners vied with one another to see who could best tickle the palates of kings and nobles.

Within the palace another force had been engaged in decorating and making ready the banquet hall. No stone was left unturned that would make this banquet a landmark in the history of such events. The scene at the palace differed from that in an hundred other places in stupendousness alone. All over the city other cooks prepared feasts for the stomachs of lesser men.

By the time darkness had settled down upon the city the guests began to arrive. The scene at the palace entrance was one of the greatest animation and beauty. Gaily decorated chariots, drawn by prancing horses, passed through the three gates, wide open to-night, in a continuous stream. One by one they rolled up the inclined plane to the top of the palace mound and deposited their gorgeously attired occupants at the great arched doorway of the building. Here a long line of carefully selected servants awaited the guests. As a man entered the major-domo of the palace examined his credentials and, finding him worthy to sit at meat with royalty, handed him over to a servant who attended him.

Only a few moments before the hour set for the banquet, the simple chariot of Nabomuran drew up before the entrance and the young commander alighted. He was passed by the officer and given into the charge of a servant who led him into a small apartment opening out of the banquet hall and assisted

him in arranging his attire. A moment later his attendant ushered him into the great hall itself.

The scene that met his gaze was one of great brilliancy and beauty. The vast apartment, forty feet broad and one hundred feet in length, was one mass of light and color. Through the center of the hall ran the banquet table, its golden and silver vessels reflecting the light from a thousand lamps. Upon their shining surfaces the rays danced and shone as from a myriad of gems. Beautiful flowers in great abundance were heaped up in pyramids upon the table and scattered about in every conceivable space. All that man's skill could do had been done toward adorning the hall. Nabomuran stopped on the threshold and gazed in admiration upon the scene before him. He was one of the late arrivals, and the hall was now crowded with men, some moving about and others standing in groups, all anxiously awaiting the serving of the feast.

At the farther end of the hall upon a raised platform stood two thrones, both constructed on the same elaborate plan and both ornamented in the same manner. Here side by side sat the two kings of Babylon. Directly in front of them at the head of the table stood two chairs of exquisite workmanship. These the monarchs were to occupy when the banquet was served. Nabomuran walked slowly up the hall and paid his respects, first to Nabonidos and then to Belshazzar. Both monarchs received him graciously. He had felt doubts as to his reception, anticipating the king's anger for his father would extend to him also, but if either monarch entertained such thoughts they were carefully concealed.

Soon after he left the monarchs' station they descended from the platform and took their places at the table. This was a signal for the guests to seek their places. Then all was ready for the banquet to begin. Negro servants, clad in gay attire, hastened into the room bearing great dishes containing viands for the feast. Course followed course until it seemed as if mortal stomach could hold no more. Every dish known at that day had a place upon the menu and the Babylonians were

the possessors of a variety of food. At length the last course was served and speedily devoured. All dishes were then removed and the table cleared preparatory to the entry of the wine.

In came a band of slaves carrying huge vessels filled with wine. Behind them came a company of musicians accompanied by singing and dancing girls. The nobles lay back in their seats waiting for the more enjoyable portion of the program. The musicians began their labors and the slaves passed rapidly along the table filling the goblets of the guests. When all were filled a signal from the chief eunuch stopped the music. The subtle rag mag, Vulmaran, arose and, holding aloft a golden goblet filled to the brim with the rarest Armenian wine, pledged the health and prosperity of the new king, calling down confusion upon the heads of his enemies foreign and domestic. Pledge followed pledge until the danger of the banquet becoming a mere drunken revel was imminent. Nabonidos, feeling his own brain succumbing to the insidious alcohol, gave orders to the musicians and singers to begin their part of the entertainment. The band struck up a lively air and three beautiful female slaves arose to dance before their masters.

They threw off the light shawls that had been wrapped about them as they entered the room and now stood before the company of men naked from the waist up, and the lower portion of their bodies covered only with a short skirt that barely reached to the knees. Beginning with a slow, undulating movement they swayed back and forth, to this side and that, their feet stationary and their arms, waving gracefully in the air, keeping time to the movements of their bodies. Gradually the music became faster and faster and the movements of the dancers became more wild and abandoned. Now in addition to the swaying of their bodies and waving of their arms the lower limbs were brought into play. Faster and faster the music rolled from the instruments and faster and faster whirled the dancers. Round and round they spun, becoming more frenzied each moment. The guests cheered them on, but

at last they became exhausted and reeled from sheer dizziness. They were caught in the arms of three of the younger nobles who had crowded about them in anticipation of the moment. The three fortunate ones carried their fair burdens to the table and poured wine down their throats.

A beautiful Armenian girl arose and in a musical, sympathetic voice sang a love tale of her native mountains. Another maiden followed with a song of similar style. She in turn gave place to three more dancers who followed the same movements of their predecessors and were in turn carried away by three more nobles. Four sets of dancers thus performed before the company, and twelve young men each had a damsel seated in his lap at the table. Meanwhile the drinking continued. Belshazzar already showed unmistakable signs of intoxication and many others about the board were little better.

For Nabomuran the scene had little charm. His heart was filled with love for one pure woman and the sight of these lewd, abandoned girls parading their nearly naked bodies before two hundred men filled him with disgust. He was no wine-bibber. The flowing cup had little attraction for him, although he drank moderately upon occasion. He sat beside the table, leaning back in his seat, his eyes half closed and his thoughts far away. While meditating upon the lives of the men about him and the menace they were to the nation, he felt a slight touch upon his shoulder.

He turned quickly and saw one of the leading servants of the royal household standing behind him. The man leaned over and slipped a small roll of parchment into his hand. Opening the roll he read thereon the following message, indited in well-formed cuneiform characters.

“Come to me at once. I desire to speak with thee upon important matters. The bearer will lead thee to my apartments.
“NITOCRIS.”

Nabomuran made a hasty survey of the apartment and its occupants. All attention was fastened upon a Grecian maiden

who was relating in a singsong tone some old Hellenic love tale. The soldier arose quietly and followed the servant out of the room. He was unnoticed save by a single pair of eyes. Vulmaran saw the incident and stored it up in the secret archives of his brain for future use.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE QUEEN'S APARTMENTS

After leaving the banquet hall the servant conducted Nabomuran through a very labyrinth of rooms and passages until they reached the suite set aside for the use of Babylon's queen. After motioning the soldier to enter the first room in the suite the servant withdrew. The soldier entered and looked about. The room was unoccupied. He seated himself upon a handsome divan and surveyed the apartment. It was a fit habitation for the foremost woman of the world. All that art and wealth could do toward adornment had been done. The bare brick walls were hidden beneath the richest draperies. Scenes of beauty were woven into the hangings with brightly hued threads. The heavy golden fringe of the tapestry swept the hard brick floor of the apartment.

Divans covered with the most beautiful and costly Oriental rugs and supplied with numberless downy pillows piled high upon them, were scattered here and there about the room, while heavy furniture adorned with trimmings of gold was standing about in a seeming disorder that was the very height of artistic order. Every piece of furniture, every rug and pillow, every ornament testified to the presence of a woman, and a woman of the most artistic, refined taste. Notwithstanding the stateliness of the apartment, it had an intangible air of comfort about it, a lack of stiffness that seemed to make a guest feel at home therein.

As Nabomuran sat there waiting, hardly knowing what to

expect, a thought of his position came over him. What if he had been lured there for treacherous reasons? There was something so unusual about the manner of his coming. What fate would be his if he were found in the queen's apartments? Speculation made him nervous. Should his presence be known to Nabonidos death would probably be his punishment, for in this room no man was allowed save the king alone. Remembering the present condition of the king and his occupation, however, he felt reassured. Then also, there was the high reputation of Nitocris herself. Should an enemy plot against him he could not secure the co-operation of the honorable queen.

He heard a slight rustle at the farther end of the room and looked up quickly. Two maidens were holding open the heavy draperies that screened the entrance to the queen's private apartment. A soft step was heard upon the floor, and in another moment Nitocris stood before him. Tall and majestic, she was every inch a queen. Her every movement was one of the greatest grace and dignity, her every act one of prudence and wisdom. Her name is well entitled to a prominent place in the list of the world's historic women. In the eyes of the soldier she seemed a goddess approaching to accept the homage of a devotee.

She advanced slowly and when directly before him she took him by the hand and bade him arise. He obeyed and she conducted him to one of the many divans. She seated herself and requested him to sit beside her. She turned half around upon the divan so that she looked directly into his face as she talked. She lost no time, but plunged directly into the subject uppermost in her mind.

"I doubt not, Nabomuran, thou art surprised at being thus summoned to thy queen's apartments at such an hour, but never will I have a better opportunity to converse with thee than now, when the king and his nobles are filling their stomachs with wine and their eyes with lewdness. I have something of great importance to say to thee, important to thyself and important to Babylon. Before I enter upon that subject, however, I will

relate to thee briefly the story of my life, a life combining heights of happiness with depths of misery."

The soldier was interested and listened intently for what might follow.

"Thou knowest my name and thou knowest me as the wife of two kings of Babylon, but my early life is little known here.

"I am the daughter of Amasis, king of Egypt. I am now forty-four years of age. I should be in the very prime of my life, but, Nabomuran, misery has made me old. I am in the clutches of a disease that is slowly, but O so surely, sapping my life and strength. I may live five years or I may live ten; it matters little to me, save that I have one object to accomplish before death claims me. That object I intend to make known unto thee this night.

"The heart that now beats within my breast little resembles that of the seventeen-year-old girl who more than twenty-six years ago bestowed it upon Evil-Merodach, the handsome and noble Prince Royal of Babylon. The prince came on a visit to my father's court, a visit intended to restore good feelings between Egypt and Babylon and also as a journey of education for the young prince. Upon this visit the prince was attended by the same body-guard thou now commandest. I had been sought by many noble young men, both from Egypt and the adjacent countries, but my father had given me the right to choose my own husband, and I had determined that where my hand went there should my heart go also. Therefore I rejected one after another of these suitors. When, however, the prince of Babylon arrived I at once beheld in him a man whom I could love. When, scarcely three weeks later, he asked me to become his princess, my heart was his, and—" dropping her voice, "he was the only man I ever loved.

"I will not burden thee with a long tale but will only state the barest facts. I married him and accompanied him back to Babylon. We took up our residence in the royal palace where a sumptuous suite of rooms had been prepared for our use. This room is a part of that same suite but its charm is gone. We

had been married a trifle less than four years when the old king died and my husband mounted the throne. Less than a year later the gods blessed us with a child, a boy. All Babylon rejoiced at having an heir for the throne, but my poor boy never came into his birthright. We watched the growth of the child with love and interest, in our pride looking forward to the day when, as king of Babylon, he should extend his empire's sway into all parts of the earth. Alas for our fond hopes! Before my babe learned to walk or his tongue learned to call me 'mother' a conspiracy was formed and my husband was foully murdered. My child was included in the schemes of the assassins but the timely interference of a Jewish slave girl saved his life. She gave up her own babe that the Prince of Babylon might live. Her child was murdered but the heir of Nebuchadnezzar was saved and is to-day alive.

"After the king's death I took up my abode in a small house outside the inner wall. Here, after I had been a widow six months, I gave birth to my second child, a daughter. She it is who is known to thee and to Babylon as Halista, the king's niece. Thanks be to Bel, none of the base blood of Nabonidos flows in her veins. It is the noble blood of Nebuchadnezzar and Amasis that, mingled in her, gives majesty to her figure and beauty to her face. Nabonidos upon marrying me insisted on her being known as his niece and not as Evil-Merodach's daughter. Think, sir, what that meant to a mother! Never since her babyhood have I been permitted to clasp that sweet creature to my bosom and call her daughter. She loves me, 'tis true, but O, how I long to tell her all and hear her call me, 'mother'.

"But it is not of Halista I would speak with thee. It is of my son, my first born I would speak, Nabomuran." She hesitated a moment and placed her hand upon his shoulder, looking straight into his eyes. "Wouldst thou support this man were he to assert his claims and seek to win his inheritance?"

"Know, O Queen, I have already sworn to do so," he answered.

He then related to her his meeting with Rastagus upon the

desert and the strange tale narrated by the Mede, closing with the vow he had there made. The queen listened attentively, becoming more and more agitated as he proceeded. When he had finished speaking she burst forth, no longer able to control the feelings that mastered her.

"As thou hast made that vow, Nabomuran I am free to inform thee, thou art the man! Thou art the Lost Prince! Thou art my son, Sheshbazzar! Thou, not Belshazzar shouldst have been crowned this day."

"Oh my son, my son!" she exclaimed, encircling him with her bare shapely arms, "thanks be to Bel, I am at last permitted to clasp thee in my arms and call thee son."

They sat silent for some moments, the mother happy in the possession of her son, the son lost in amazement at the revelation made to him and electrified by the caresses of so beautiful a woman. He could hardly believe it true. He, Nabomuran, king of Babylon? A sudden feeling of wrong and injustice came over him. His eyes flashed and he leaped from the divan, crying:

"Who will follow Sheshbazzar? Who will help wrest the throne from the usurper?"

"Hush," said the queen, "the very walls of this building have ears."

He resumed his seat beside the queen and relapsed into silence. Wild thoughts presented themselves to his feverish brain, thoughts of rebellion and success. Yet there was ever present a dull, indefinable sense of helplessness. As a soldier he foresaw the obstacles in the pathway leading to the throne. Could he convince the people of his rights? Would the army side with him or would they take the part of Nabonidos? He remained silent, absorbed, yet ever conscious of the queen's gaze fixed upon his face. At length he turned to her and asked:

"What wouldst thou have me do, my queen?"

"I cannot advise as to details, my son, but I believe it is thy duty to win thy throne, but there must be no bloodshed."

"Impossible," he interrupted. "No great end was ever reached without some sacrifice."

She grew sad.

"O my son," she said, "mine eyes have seen so much of war and blood. I cannot think of thy throne being won over dead men's bodies but I suppose thou art right. The good hereafter justifies the bad at present. I beg thee, though, go slowly. Let there be no murder. Remember that Belshazzar is also my son and thy half-brother. True my hatred of his libertine father descends upon the son but I am yet his mother and I would not have him harmed. Thou, Sheshbazzar, art a *man* pure and noble, worthy to sit upon thy father's throne. Thy half-brother is weak and effeminate. Thou art a soldier accustomed to camps and warfare. He is a boy, happy only in the palace surrounded by dancing and singing creatures, whom my lips almost refuse to mention.

"My son, I am a pure woman. I have never visited the temple of Beltis. I have always used my foreign birth as an argument against my going through the ordeal. Be thou also pure. Let not thyself be lured into the follies of this wicked city. Beware of women. I have heard them whisper of thy manly beauty, but hearken not thou to their voices. Answer me one question. Dost thou love?"

The prince, as he must now be called, started at the question; it was so unexpected. He hesitated a moment and then answered calmly:

"Yea, my queen."

"Upon whom does the love of Sheshbazzar descend?"

"Orma, the daughter of Nehum, a leader among the Jews."

"A Jewess!" she exclaimed.

"Yea, a Jewess, the fairest and purest of her race. To see her is to love her."

"I doubt it not. Many of her race are both beautiful and good, but think my son; would she be an acceptable queen to the Babylonian people?"

"That I know not but if I am to be king the woman I love shall be my queen, whatever her nationality."

The queen sighed as she answered:

"I hope some day to see thy princess."

A few moments later he left the apartment.

CHAPTER XV

'TWIXT LOVE AND RELIGION

From the palace Nabomuran, or Sheshbazzar, as he must now be called, hurried to his home and immediately sought his couch, but little sleep did he obtain. The revelation of the queen completely revolutionized his aim in life. Youth loves power and no young man could well resist the sensation of elation that was bound to come when he found himself suddenly transformed from a mere officer in the nation's army to a royal prince and even more than that, the lawful king. Aside from any personal feelings, however, he considered it a duty he owed his ancestry to win his rights. With a brain filled with such thoughts it was not strange that he found sleep hard to win, but toward morning his weariness triumphed over his mind and he fell into a deep slumber that lasted until far into the day.

He appeared at the breakfast table long after his worthy father (foster-father hereafter) had partaken of his morning meal and left for the temple. The prince ate in silence, his thoughts still dwelling upon his new position and its responsibilities. He regretted his father's absence as in his present mood he felt the need of an adviser and a confidant and no one could take the old priest's place in that respect. Now as he thought of Neboakhu he wondered why he had not made the revelation. Inquiry of a servant brought the information that Neboakhu would not be at home until evening. It was the

day for the annual conferring of degrees upon the priesthood and a large class of young men was to be elevated to the lowest order of priesthood, with a corresponding promotion in other degrees.

Involuntarily the prince's mind dwelt upon Nehum and the old man's evident wisdom. As a Jew, having no interest in the present government, he could not only be trusted as a confidant but his advice would be entirely unbiased. As soon therefore as his simple meal was finished, he called for his chariot and was driven rapidly to the old Jew's residence. He noticed with surprise the comparative quiet of the city streets, few persons and they only of the lowest classes, being abroad. Babylon had not recovered from her all night debauch.

Upon his arrival at the residence of Nehum, Sheshbazzar passed around the house and through the gardens to the vine-clad bower that held so precious a place in his life. Orma was seated within the bower, with little Ruth by her side. She was busily engaged upon some difficult needlework and all her attention was devoted to her task. For some seconds she was unconscious of the presence of her lover, but the magnetism of his ardent gaze soon caused her to look up. When she beheld Sheshbazzar a quick blush mounted to her cheeks.

She arose instantly and advanced to meet him, leaving her needlework in a disordered heap upon the couch. One tiny hand she held out to him in welcome. The soldier grasped it and quickly dropping upon one knee, carried it to his lips.

"Thou art welcome here, Captain," she said after he had arisen.

"I felt sure of a welcome; thou art always kind to me," he said simply.

She returned to the couch and he seated himself upon a low stool at her feet. After his first remark he said nothing for some moments. Orma's quick perception revealed to her the disquietude of his mind and it worried her, she thinking it concerned Heber. She at last broke the silence, which was now becoming oppressive.

"Thou art troubled in spirit, sir. Thou shouldst not be after the stirring scenes of yesterday," she said.

"The doings of yesterday but add to my burden, and make more difficult the task before me," he answered.

Her intuition now showed her that Heber was not in his thoughts.

"I should like to speak with thy father and thyself concerning matters of importance. Can he not join us here?" he continued.

Ruth was instantly dispatched to summon the old man. During the interval which elapsed between her departure and the arrival of Nehum, they sat silently, she leaning back dreamily, her eyes half closed and he intently regarding the ground at his feet. When Nehum came he was not alone. His companion was none other than the great prophet of Israel, Daniel. Both men extended a hearty greeting to the young man. Nehum seated himself beside the daughter and Daniel took the stool vacated by Ruth, who after calling her master had not returned.

"As Daniel happens to be my guest to-day I took the liberty of bringing him hither," said Nehum.

"I rejoice at his being present," replied the prince. "Knowing his wisdom and his knowledge of our history I am sure his advice will be of value to me."

"I shall be honored if my poor advice can be of service to thee," said the prophet.

Without wasting time in preliminaries, Sheshbazzar plunged directly into his narrative, beginning with the story related by Rastagus and closing with the queen's revelation of the preceding night. His account was simple and straightforward, and told in the third person. The eyes of his auditors were fastened upon him throughout the recital, his own gaze resting first upon one and then another but usually upon Orma. She leaned upon her father's shoulder, her hands clasped and her eyes fastened intently upon the speaker. As the narrative progressed and she realized her lover to be the lawful king of this great empire a feeling partaking of both awe and veneration came over her.

She saw more clearly than ever before how large a place this man occupied in her heart and life, but she also saw the barriers between them grow to seemingly insurmountable proportions.

When Sheshbazzar had finished speaking he looked from one to another of the group in expectation of some remark. Orma, true to her womanliness remained silent, her eloquent eyes alone telling the prince her interest both in the tale and its narrator. Nehum motioned to Daniel that he was expected to offer the first comment. The prophet obeyed.

"Our Father has laid a heavy burden upon thee, young man, and my poor wisdom does not enable me to advise thee at this time. Only God, the Supreme, the Omniscient can guide thee."

"Thy story is not entirely new to me," he continued. "I well remember the rumors of thy rescue that were current at the time. I knew personally the priest who received thee and that he rose to be chief priest I also knew. For many years I have suspected that if Sheshbazzar were really alive thou wert the man. I was surprised to learn from thee upon the occasion of our first meeting that thou considered Neboakhu thy father. When it comes to advising thee as to thy future action I know not what to say. Our people believe the prophesied destruction of this great city to be at hand and believe also that it will result in our deliverance from captivity. Thou mayest be the man destined by God to deliver us, but our prophecies all point to the Persian, Cyrus. Be not hasty. Take time to consider well before acting."

"In thy narrative," said Nehum when the prophet had finished, "thou saidst the Mede had sworn to assist the Lost Prince when he should rise to claim his own. Shalt thou seek his assistance?"

"I have thought upon that point, but I fear were I to ask his aid it would bring the Persians here. Rastagus would undoubtedly keep his vow but I fear it would end in my kingdom being swallowed up in that of Cyrus."

"Wisely spoken," commented Daniel.

The prophet now arose to depart.

"I will bear thee in mind," he said addressing Sheshbazzar, "and mayhap I can advise thee more later."

"Thy advice will always be of value to me," said the prince.

Daniel departed but Nehum remained, merely nodding a farewell to his guest. When they were alone Sheshbazzar broached a new topic.

"When I gain my throne, sir, I hope thy daughter may become queen of Babylon," he said.

The old man was visibly affected and Orma, blushing, hid her face in her father's robe.

"I know not, Prince," the old man replied. "I am not ambitious for my daughter. I would be happy in seeing her married to the man she loved. That she cares for thee I cannot deny, but as to her marrying thee I cannot well decide. We owe thee an everlasting debt of gratitude for our preservation and I honor thee above all thy race. It is hard for me to think of my daughter as the wife of one of thy people, but I could see it and be happy didst thou both worship the same God.

"I hoped and prayed that the Captain of the Guard might learn to see our God as we see Him but when that captain becomes the king it seems almost an impossibility. Still, Prince, thy struggle may be the means of bringing thee to see Him as we see Him, the One Supreme Being."

During this speech Orma had glanced nervously from her father to the prince and then back at her father again. She was fearful of its effect upon the fiery temper of the Babylonian. She was pleased, therefore, to see him smile when her father finished speaking. He did not at once reply to Nehum but relapsed into that thoughtful silence so characteristic of the man. As he remained communing with his own thoughts the smile vanished and in its place there came an expression of displeasure.

At length he spoke. The answer he made was both satisfactory and unsatisfactory to the old Jew, paradoxical as that may seem. It was satisfactory in showing the superiority of

his religious belief to that of the blind idolater and unsatisfactory in showing how the prince clung to his belief.

"Good Nehum," he began slowly, "I have heard thy words; I appreciate thy motives; I honor thy beliefs. Thou lookest upon me as a worshiper of idols and in that thou doest me injustice. In my heart I believe thy Jehovah to be my Bel. Deep in the nature of every man there exists a belief in a Supreme Being, who rules the world, controls the affairs of men and empires, holds us in His hands and directs our lives to suit His plans.

"When thou kneelest with thy face toward Jerusalem thou art as much kneeling to an image as am I when I kneel to the golden statue of Bel. Thou knowest Jerusalem is not Jehovah and I know that golden image is not Bel but we bow to them as symbols of that Supreme Being whom we both worship, though bestowing upon Him different names and attributes. I have heard of thy people worshiping thy God in a great temple. I have seen that temple in its present condition and as I stood upon a large block of marble gazing down upon the crumbled mass at my feet I felt sad, as if the temple of mine own god was in ruins. There was no God in those broken marble blocks, yet all Jews pray with their eyes turned toward that mass of ruins.

"True it is many of the ignorant among my people see no farther than the golden image but men who have thought and studied about their religion see beyond that shrine upon the temple's summit, see beyond that golden statue and behold the Omniscient, the All Ruling One, who made this earth, peopled it and now rules it. In my heart of hearts, O Nehum, I can see thy daughter and myself walking side by side in the world to come if thou deniest us that happiness in this world."

The old Jew had been an interested listener. He took no offense at the young man's words. He saw of course opportunities for argument, weak places in the Babylonian's defense but he was loath to debate with him. He felt the force of the young man's logic, was susceptible to the influence of his words no less than to the magnetism of the speaker. Yet the speech

caused the good old man pain. It showed satisfaction with the present; no unsatisfied yearnings after better and higher things. It showed a religious belief stern and unbending. Had Babylonian worship included human sacrifice, Nehum felt that this man would have upheld and defended it. Upon one point, however, he was determined to hear the young man speak.

"What sayest thou to the manner of worshiping Beltis, the wife of him thou callest Bel?" he asked.

It was plain to see that the prince was greatly agitated at the question. He arose and paced nervously back and forth within the enclosure, his face twitching with emotion and his hands clenched. Nehum feared that he had committed an error in asking the question he knew full well to be difficult of answering, but he wished to hear the young man's opinion of this, the most degrading form of worship connected with the Babylonian religion. Sheshbazzar was not angry. He despised this peculiar rite himself and his present agitation was caused by his realization of the impossibility of defending it. He was determined, however, to say something and at length he made answer.

"Good Nehum," he began, "I wish no ears but thine were present to hear what I have to say but I crave thy daughter's pardon, assuring her that my words spring from a pure mind. This ceremony of which thou speakest, like all parts of our worship, was intended to teach a great truth. It was intended to show man's insignificance as compared with the gods. For a woman to sacrifice her greatest possession, her chastity, would impress upon her the supremacy of the gods and the littleness of humanity. Only once a lifetime is a woman obliged to go through this ceremony. Many of our foremost women have rebelled against this worship and I firmly believe it will soon be abolished. My mother, Nitocris, on the strength of her Egyptian birth has steadfastly refused to submit to this form of her adopted faith. My sister, Halista, who next to thy daughter is the fairest woman in Babylon has not yet submitted although gossip has it the priests have notified her of

her duty. As long as her brother has life and strength she never shall. I trust my words are acceptable, good Nehum."

The old man had listened to the words attentively. He saw the deep sincerity beneath each word and he realized more than ever before the personal purity of the man. No listener could fail to note the deep loathing that the prince had for the custom he attempted to defend.

It was impossible that Orma, born and reared in the great city, could have lived in ignorance of the custom. Her attitude during her lover's speech had been one of true modesty. She leaned upon her father's shoulder with her gaze fixed upon the floor of the bower, yet the young man had been conscious of an occasional fleeting glance from a pair of black eyes. At his placing her beauty before Halista's she looked up suddenly, blushing with mingled pleasure and embarrassment. Now that he had finished the speaking of words she cared not to hear she straightened up and looked upon him calmly.

"Prince," said the old man, "thy words show me how deep and true is thy nature and how pure thy life. Thou art worthy of my daughter and I consider her worthy of thee. Her birth is high; in her veins flows the best blood of Judah; her ancestors were mighty men in our once proud kingdom. Sir, when thou chooseth Jehovah as thy Ruler, in that hour will I place her hand in thine and bid thee take her as thy wife.

"Worthy Nehum," replied the prince, "thy opinion of me is most flattering. I appreciate thy words, but noble sir, greatly as I love thy daughter, I should prefer to see her face no more, to walk through this short life a lonely man, rather than pretend a change in my religion that I did not feel. I am to understand then that until I desert the religion of my people I must be a stranger to thy daughter?"

"I think it best," replied the old man solemnly.

"Words cannot express the regret I feel," exclaimed Nehum, rising and grasping the hands of the prince. "I love thee as a son and would gladly welcome thee as the husband of my

daughter, but sir, thy married life could never be happy with thee an idolater and she a worshiper of Jehovah."

The brow of the Babylonian darkened. The word 'idolater' sounded harsh upon his ears and the first feeling of resentment came over him. He quickly overcame it and in a moment was able to speak calmly.

"I cannot see the necessity for thine action, sir," he said, "but as a man of honor I shall abide by thy decision. Yet I firmly believe when two persons love purely and sincerely the gods, call them by what name ye choose, will open the way for them. The time has now arrived for me to depart."

"May the blessings of Jehovah rest upon thee, sir," said the old man.

Orma extremely pale but in perfect control of herself came forward and offered her hand. The prince took her in his arms and drew her toward him in one embrace.

"Farewell, thou dearest and fairest of women," he whispered as he kissed her upturned forehead.

"Farewell Prince," she murmured. "My father is right but it is hard to bid thee go. Wherever thou art, remember the love of Orma goes with thee and always when she prays will she ask God to bless and keep thee."

He still held her and she made no effort to disengage herself. Neither did the old man interfere. Orma suddenly looked up into his face and asked:

"O sir, for my sake I beg thee to save my brother."

"Thy brother, little one, is dear to me also and if I can intercede for him I shall do so. Now farewell. Whether I fail and die in a dungeon or win and reign as king, thy place in my heart remains the same and none other can usurp it."

He left the imprint of one more kiss upon her forehead. Then, grasping the hand of Nehum, he bowed and was gone.

The old man followed a moment later. Orma finding herself alone threw herself upon the couch and gave way to the grief that she had previously controlled so well.

CHAPTER XVI

BENEATH THE EUPHRATES

Sad and oppressed, Sheshbazzar walked slowly down the path to the road. His chariot was in waiting under the guidance of Susa, who since his brief imprisonment by the Jews had lived in a state of perpetual fear.

"To the palace," said the prince as he entered the vehicle.

Susa eased his hold upon the reins and the noble bays sprang forward, shaking their heads with delight at being again in motion. Along the Borsipian road they flew, Sheshbazzar urging his driver to speed. They stopped at the old palace while the prince inquired after the welfare of his wounded men. Then on again, across the bridge and on to the palace. All of the gates were open at this hour and the chariot passed through, drawing up before the great portal of the royal residence.

Sheshbazzar being known to all the palace guards was allowed to enter unquestioned. He hurried through the long halls leading to the rooms occupied by the king when engaged upon matters of state. At the door he waited while a servant carried his name to the king. He was bidden to enter at once. The two kings occupied the new twin thrones. Before them stood the rab mag Vulmaran and Ulbar, an ugly looking dwarf who held the important position of chief spy to the king. Evidently business of the greatest importance was being discussed.

The prince saw in a moment that something had happened to undermine his standing with the elder monarch. Instead of his usual gracious greeting Nabonidos acknowledged the young man's presence by the merest nod, and then continued his conversation with Vulmaran. A servant was called up and given some whispered instructions. He turned and hurried toward the entrance. As he passed the prince, who was standing some thirty feet from the thrones, he whispered hurriedly:

"I beg thee sir, leave this place at once."

Sheshbazzar paid no heed to the warning but remained standing in the same spot, waiting until the king should see fit to receive him. Meanwhile the conference about the throne continued. Sheshbazzar noted the occasional glances cast in his direction and coupling them with the whispered words of the slave, he doubted not that he was the subject of the deliberations. He decided, however, to stand his ground and await the result of the consultation, never once dreaming of the fate being decided for him.

At last, after the prince had been waiting at least a quarter of an hour, Nabonidos raised his voice, saying: "Nabomuran come hither and state thine errand."

He advanced to the foot of the raised platform and in a tone at once calm and self-assured, presented his request.

"I come, O King," he said, "to intercede with thee for the young Jew, Heber. The young man was led into the conspiracy he at last headed, by a woman who exerted over him a strange power, a power that forced him to do her will even against his own inclination. Knowing these circumstances, O King, I feel myself justified in appealing to thee to spare his life and grant him his liberty."

"Our times are indeed degenerate," observed the king, "when one traitor appeals for the life of another."

"What meanest these words from my king?" asked the prince, astonished.

"What do I mean?" thundered the king. "Thou askest me what I mean? I mean just what my words imply. Thou, who deservest the death of a traitor, comest hither to seek mercy for one less guilty than thyself. The Jew shall not die, but by the gods, Nabomuran thou shalt. Thy previous deeds and rank but make thy present crime the more despicable, the more deserving of the fate we have decided to be thy just desert."

Sheshbazzar stood appalled at the king's words. So sudden was this announcement that for a moment he failed to compre-

hend its meaning. Then as the enormity of the accusation came over him his knees weakened, and he turned ashen pale.

"Ha," cried Belshazzar, "his very face proves his guilt."

Such words coming from the boy he had always loved, the scholar he had been at such pains to teach, stung the prince to anger. His indignation made a man of him again and he stood before his accusers and judges, straight and calm, looking them directly in the face.

"I demand to know the lying charges my dear and good friend Vulmaran has brought against me," he said coolly.

The rab mag turned white and red by turns. His own guilty conscience bade him fear the man he accused. He was frightened lest his own traitorous schemes were known to the prince.

"Vulmaran is a true and trusted servant of his king. Long has he been suspicious of thy fidelity, Nabomuran, and ever careful of his monarch's interest, he has had thine actions watched. Therefore this morning he was able to expose thee completely, to show his king how utterly false and treacherous was the man upon whom that king had showered honors and for whom greater honors were intended. Know thou, Nabomuran, that among the honors to be distributed in celebration of our son's coronation thou wert destined for the greatest. Upon thee was to descend a rank never yet held by one so young. General of our army would we have made thee. Already, in expectation of thy advancement, we have signed a decree removing thee from the command of our guard and promoting Belibus to that post, intending next to sign the decree appointing thee to the command of all the armies of Babylon. But now death, not honor, must be thy share in our gifts. Thou hast none to blame but thyself. Instead of waiting to receive the honors we intended thou hast allied thyself with rebels and traitors, hoping by thy influence over them to rise to power."

The monarch paused for breath and the accused took this occasion to say: "I demand to know fully the details of the crime I am supposed to have committed."

"It is our right, Nabomuran, to condemn thee unheard but

because of the love we once bore thee we will give thee an opportunity to explain all. Canst thou prove that Vulmaran lied, he and not thee shall go to the drowning chamber. Greater opportunity never had an accused man to free himself from the charges brought against him. Vulmaran, stand forth and deliver thine accusation."

The rab mag, inwardly trembling lest the prince should accuse him also, stepped forward and repeated the information he had previously given the king. He faced Nabonidos and addressed him, not daring to speak directly to the man he accused and to look him in the face as he gave his lying testimony.

"Thou rememberest, O King, that the night this man reached Babylon thou didst send me to summon him to thy presence. After I greeted him he began asking questions concerning thee and thy son, ending with this remark: 'Neither Nabonidos nor Belshazzar is fit to be king of this great empire. I would, Vulmaran, this man Sheshbazzar arose and led a successful rebellion against the present government. I, for one, stand ready to assist him.' This placed me upon my guard and from that moment I have had him watched. His every movement has been known to me.

"That night, King Nabonidos, thou didst order him to send a messenger to Borsippa. Instead of choosing a trusty man from among his father's servants, he selects this Jew (for whose life he has this morning appealed) knowing full well the young man's affiliations with the rebels. The night selected for the Jews' attack this worthy captain, instead of being in the old palace ready to lead his men, visits the house of this Heber's father. As he starts to return, he is taken prisoner by his own servant and carried to the headquarters of the conspirators. In some manner unknown to me he escaped in time to reach the old palace after the battle was over and his Jewish friends defeated. Without doubt, O King, it was his intention to become their leader if they had won. As it was he arrived in time to strike one blow for his king and thus for the moment save his reputation.

“Last night while we were celebrating thy son’s coronation this man was summoned from the banquet hall to another conference with the enemies of the nation. Last of all, O King, this man is Sheshbazzar, the claimant to thy throne. To gain his ambition he would open our gates to the Persian.”

The accused stood quietly as he heard his enemy pile one lie upon another until a monument of falsehood confronted him. To demolish that carefully built structure would require dragging in the names of two noble women, Nitocris and Orma. Even had he felt certain, beyond the chance of a doubt, that the explanation he could make would clear him of the charges, it is doubtful if he would have felt himself justified in making such explanation. He realized that the rab mag’s final announcement sealed his doom. He wondered how the official had discovered his identity, he having supposed his secret safe. Knowing the very name Sheshbazzar to be a perpetual nightmare unto Nabonidos, the prince realized that any charges brought against him would be willingly believed as an excuse for ridding the nation of a claimant to the throne. In that moment he fully believed his fate to be settled and despondent as he was because of Nehum’s refusal to bless his love, he little cared.

Meanwhile the eyes of all were upon him. Nabonidos had always cherished a certain amount of affection for the young man, and had his identity not been revealed it is doubtful if the false charges would have condemned him. Now that Nabonidos saw before him that hated man whose expected appearance had so long been dreaded, all vestiges of love or mercy were seemingly obliterated. He awaited the prince’s reply, but the latter stood silent, his head bowed and his extreme pallor manifest even through the coat of desert tan.

“Well, Prince of Babylon, what sayest thou?” at length cried Nabonidos.

“What can I say, O King, when my fate is already settled? Hast thou not already condemned me? Now that my true name is known to thee and I am in thy power, no explanation

that I might make would avail to save me," replied the accused.

"Then thy fate be upon thine own head, Nabomuran. I swear thy new name and rank influence me not; I have known them for years," replied the king.

The prince started. Could it be true? Nabonidos had known of his royal rights for years? Ah no! He was sure the monarch spoke falsely.

"King Nabonidos," said the prince, "I am guilty of neither intrigue nor conspiracy, but there are reasons why I cannot explain to thee some of my actions during the past few days; should I do so, innocent persons might suffer. Some day, O King, thou wilt find the true traitor and I give thee in charge to bestow the fate upon him thou hast planned for me."

"Nabomuran," said the king, "I have loved thee as a son and thine actions cause me more sorrow than anger, but in times like these, when the empire is assailed by foes without and traitors within, a sovereign cannot consult his personal feelings. My duty as king therefore compels me to sentence thee to the death meted out to all who prove false to their country."

A stillness as of the tomb came over the room. Even Vulmaran, whose plot was thus brought to a successful climax, could but feel the solemnity of the moment. Belshazzar, a coward in all things, leaned against the back of his throne, white and trembling. Nabonidos, more self-controlled, was also affected. Apparently the condemned man was the least concerned of all. For several moments the strange stillness pervaded the room. Vulmaran was the first to return to the matter in hand.

"Here guards," he called, "do thine office."

Sheshbazzar turned and for the first time was aware of the presence of a line of guards. They had entered silently and were drawn up in line behind him. Their presence reminded him of the servant who had warned him, and he concluded that the man had then been on the way to call them.

These men, many of whom had served under the prince, were now compelled to place their former commander under arrest.

Duty is a worker of miracles and these men seized, bound and blind-folded him apparently without the least compunction. In this condition he was led from the room, through interminable halls and passages, down long flights of stone steps and around sharp corners. Damper and damper grew the atmosphere as they progressed, revealing to the prisoner his whereabouts. He was beneath the Euphrates. The full meaning of his sentence came over him. As in the day of the Doges a journey across the Bridge of Sighs was always in one direction, so the journey through those long passages and down those rough steps from Babylon's royal palace to her royal prison, had but one meaning; but one fate was in store for the unfortunate who was led through the labyrinth to the dungeon. Even could he burst his prison door he could never find his way back to daylight. Cunningly indeed had Nebuchadnezzar planned his dungeons. Surely was he rid of an enemy when he saw him led away through that first long passage which, though on the way to the prison, in reality led away from it.

On, on went the prisoner blindly, led by his captors. At length they stopped and held a whispered consultation. Then the prisoner heard the creaking of a door. He was thrust into the dungeon thus opened. His fetters and hoodwink were removed and Babylon's rightful king was in her deepest dungeon.

CHAPTER XVII

AN OFFER OF LIFE

The dungeon into which the king of Babylon had thrown the man by birth intended for that office was less than fifteen feet square. Its cold brick walls were perpetually covered with drops of water that oozed down through the river bed into the prison beneath. The prince knew many such cells to lie about him but no sound penetrated into his prison to tell him of fellow beings in like situation.

The furniture of the cell consisted only of a rough timber bed covered with mattings of rushes and a small three-legged stool. All comforts were lacking; only such articles as were absolutely required to keep soul and body together were provided. Air and light, neither in sufficient quantities but more of the former than the latter, were admitted through a number of small holes piercing the heavy timber of the door. What a habitation for a royal prince! Was it a Divine judgment that a descendant of the great Nebuchadnezzar should occupy the foul and lonely prison his grandsire's cunning had devised?

After the great bar had been put in place and the prisoner heard the retreating footsteps of the guard grow faint in the distance, he threw himself upon the couch. As he lay there the events of the past few days crowded before his eyes in a confused medley. In one brief day he saw himself rise from a soldier to a royal prince and then suddenly drop down into a dungeon. He followed every incident of his life from the moment he, at Jerusalem, had turned his horse's head toward Babylon for the long journey across the desert, to the present time.

As his mind dwelt upon the scene in the palace he was struck with one fact, the clever ingenuity of Vulmaran who had taken two or three comparatively trivial incidents and woven them into a chain of evidence sufficient to condemn a man to death. In his heart Sheshbazzar believed that Nabonidos placed little credence upon the rab mag's charges but only accepted them as affording him an opportunity of getting rid of the only man who could dispute his title to the throne.

For several hours the prince lay thus a prey to his own frenzied thoughts until, wearied by the long reverie, oppressed by the air of the dungeon and the realization of his coming terrible death, his mind gave way. He burst forth in bitter imprecations upon the gods.

"Oh Bel! Oh Merodach! Ye cruel gods! Ye whom I have served so faithfully! Why hast thou forsaken me? Is it thus ye repay the veneration and service I have always given

thee? O, ye ears of stone that hear not, ye hearts of adamant that feel not, ye bloodless arms that act not! Who are ye that men call thee gods? Selfish, hard-hearted gods! Away with thee Bel! Away with thee Merodach! I defy thee! I hate thee! If thou art gods save me from the death that is in store for me. Carry me forth from this place and sit me on my father's throne.

"Ah! There are no gods! Man is created as is the lowest animal. Why then should man have gods and the animals none. Ah no, there are no gods! Only cowards believe in gods. Brave men defy them. I defy them! Do thy worst, I fear thee not!"

Suddenly his strong nature asserted itself, conquering the weakness of his mind. In a moment he was calm. He arose and sat upright upon the edge of the couch.

"Sheshbazzar, for shame," he addressed himself, "revile not the gods. Up to this moment they have honored thee. Trust them yet. Not until thou art led into yonder chamber to drown like a rat, shouldst thou lose faith. As long as the breath of life remains within a man just so long should he trust his god."

He felt weary and again stretching his length upon the couch, he soon fell into a deep slumber. He was awakened by the sound of approaching footsteps, ringing through the echoing passages. It was night and the approaching party carried a light whose faint rays crept through the holes in his prison door. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps until by paying strict attention to the sound he could judge them to belong to two persons. At length the glimmer of the light became so strong that it revealed to the prisoner more of the horror of his dungeon than he had before believed. The rays coming through the air holes in the door, rested upon a gruesome sight—the mouldering skull and bones of a former occupant.

Finally he heard strong hands removing the great bar that secured the door. A moment later the door was opened slightly and a man squeezed in, his companion remaining outside. At the first creak of the opening door the prisoner had leaped from

his couch and now stood defiantly, ready to defend himself should it be necessary.

"Who is it seeks to mar the solitude of my cell?" he demanded.

"It is I, Vulmaran," was the answer in smooth, oily tones.

"Hast thou come to taunt me on the success of thy villainies?"

"Nay, Nabomuran," was the reply.

"My name is Sheshbazzar," corrected the prisoner with some dignity.

"Sheshbazzar," continued the rab mag, smiling, "I am come not to taunt, but to help; not to accuse, but to lead thee hence a free man. Moreover I am come to offer thee my assistance in winning thy father's throne."

Vulmaran placed the lamp upon the stool and faced the prisoner, smiling blandly but closely watching the man to see the effect of his words. Sheshbazzar questioned the man's sincerity and remained silent, his glance fixed upon the horrible sight in the corner.

"Has a few hours' imprisonment so cowed thy brave spirit as to destroy thy aspirations for royalty?" inquired the rab mag.

"Nay Vulmaran, the events of the past few days have served to reveal unto me the treachery of man. Only three days since I rode into Babylon after a long and arduous journey. Hardly had I arrived at home when I was visited by a man I have always trusted. After giving me a welcome that I thought genuine he delivered to me a message from the king. From that moment that man has been my enemy, seeking to ruin me by any means he could employ. His tongue has whispered lies concerning me until the greatest lie of all lands me here in this revolting place. Here he who once commanded thousands lies alone, save for the filthy crawling creatures and the bones of my unfortunate predecessor who, no doubt, was placed here at the instance of the same deep-dyed villain who is responsible for my incarceration."

"Nay, nay, Sheshbazzar, call no names. Listen. Ambition is a fault, if fault it is, common to mankind. No man however

humble or unworthy is denied its possession. Think not, O Prince, the worm gnawing at thy vitals has no brothers? A member of the same family has long been crawling, eating in my own intestines. As thou well knowest, two former rab mags of Babylon have made themselves king, once to the great discomfiture of thy royal father. Is not Vulmaran as able a conspirator as Neriglissar or Nabonidos? Would he not fill a throne as acceptably as either of them? If then I plotted for mine own advancement, who would be a greater obstacle in my path than thyself? Why should I not seek thy downfall if mine own chances of success were thereby heightened? All life is selfishness. Here in thy prison cell thou canst see yonder spider swelling his ugly belly by sacrificing other insects.

"I am not here, however, to deliver an address upon the weaknesses of mankind, but I am here to speak with thee upon matters of importance to both of us. Believest thou that the Jews themselves thought of rebellion? Ah no. Vulmaran whispered to them and they were fired with zeal, but they quickly got beyond my control. The fools blundered and well did they pay for their mistake. My first move was defeated and I waited for my next. The refusal of the chief priest to bless this baby king and his announcement of Sheshbazzar's existence set me thinking. Vulmaran could not become king with Evil-Merodach's son alive. Therefore Sheshbazzar must die; but who is Sheshbazzar and where does he reside? How easy to learn!

"A young man is called away from a banquet. He obeys the summons and seeks the antechamber of the queen's apartments. He seats himself upon a divan. Hidden in a curtain behind the divan is a little maiden who obeys Vulmaran's every wish. Words are spoken. The maiden has ears, yea, and a tongue also, and the young man leaves not the palace ere Vulmaran knows every word that was spoken. The identity of his mysterious rival is known; indeed, he has always had a suspicion in that direction, knowing that Neboakhu was never married. Next was to bring about that man's death. A weak monarch

is clay in the hands of his ministers. Nabonidos falls into the trap and condemns to death a man he loves more even, I believe, than he does his own son. Oh, Oh, of all the intrigues I have planned, Prince, this was the easiest."

"Easy because the subject of thy plans was not a villain like thyself."

The rab mag smiled derisively.

"Words are but poor weapons, Prince. Thou canst not slay me with them," he said.

"Fear not. My hands are too honest to be ever stained with such vile blood as thine."

"Fear!" exclaimed the rab mag. "What have I to fear? Thou art unarmed while I have weapons and am attended."

"Come Sheshbazzar," he said persuasively, "revile me not. I am sent hither by the king to carry out thy sentence. I am here to conduct thee to the drowning chamber. Have I not then the power to slay thee? Have I not also the power to lead thee into the light above? I am not here to kill thee, but to save thee. I have a proposal to make unto thee."

"Since morning," he continued, "I have thought much on my plans for becoming king and I see many obstacles in my way. Events are against me. I cannot even hope to retain my present position for long. Other tongues than mine have been at work and Nabonidos trusts not his rab mag as once he did. In time will come my removal from office if not my death. I have therefore a proposal to make unto thee. What thou couldst not accomplish alone and what I cannot do alone, we can both obtain by working together. I am here then to lead thee forth from here and conduct thee without the city. Go thou into the surrounding country and raise thine army. March upon Babylon and surround it. Some dark night the friends of Vulmaran will throw open the gates and Sheshbazzar will enter. The rest is easily accomplished."

"What is the price Vulmaran places upon his services?" inquired the prisoner.

"My price is small," answered the plotter. "Susiana to be

independent of Babylon with Vulmaran as its king and Halista, the sister of the victorious prince, to become the wife of Iddin, son of the new king of Susiana."

"Small!" cried the prince passionately. "Callest thou the half of a kingdom and the honor and happiness of a good woman, a small price for thy treachery to Nabonidos. Nay, Vulmaran, thou canst not tempt me thus. If I mount my father's throne I shall mount it with skirts clean of such mud as thee."

"The drowning chamber then awaits thee," cried the rab mag, white with anger.

He opened the door and called upon the guard to enter. Not one, but three men obeyed the call. Sheshbazzar eagerly scanned their faces in search of a friend. Ah no! They were Susianian slaves. The cunning rab mag dare trust no soldier with this job but had brought three slaves from his own household, men trained to obey his every command.

They seized the prince but he threw them off. A terrible struggle followed. He seemed possessed of a maniac's strength and for some moments kept the three at bay, but it availed him little. He was tripped and thrown, falling heavily upon the damp floor of the dungeon, and before he could rise his arms were pinioned and his ankles shackled. No time was lost. As soon as he was completely within their power they pushed him through the door and forced him along the short passage leading from the corridor of the dungeons to the mysterious chamber of death, of whose terrors the victim had so often heard.

Vulmaran threw open the door of the terrible room. Sheshbazzar peered in anxiously. It was apparently a simple dungeon. No instrument of death or torture could be seen. No hint of the rumored terror was manifest. The only object to be seen was a huge chair built of the stoutest timber. Hanging from its back, its arms, its rounds were broad leather straps.

The prince of Babylon was forced into this chair. His forehead was strapped to the chair back, his arms to the chair arms

and his legs to the chair rounds. There was no swimming in this chamber! While the slaves were binding him Sheshbazzar made a hasty survey of the room. All he could see to indicate its purpose was a circular opening, two feet in diameter, in the ceiling on the side of the room opposite the chair. Through this opening would the strange executioner enter. The prisoner was in proper position.

Vulmaran picked up the lamp that the slaves had brought into the room, and set it in a niche high up on the wall.

"I leave thee a light so that thou mayest see thy executioner come. He will come slowly and thou mayest be interested in watching him. Of course the water will put out the light but by that time thou will not know darkness from light. Now farewell, King of Babylon, may thy reign be long and prosperous," said Vulmaran as he backed slowly toward the door.

Upon the threshold he stopped and bowed obsequiously to his victim. Then he closed and barred the great water-tight door. He motioned to the slaves and they threw over the lever that opened the flood gate. Within the chamber all was silent.

"Ah Father Euphrates," cried Vulmaran, "how kind thou art to thus remove our enemies!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A FRIEND IN NEED

Not until the heavy door was closed and barred and Sheshbazzar found himself alone in the chamber of death, did the full sense of his approaching torture and death come over him. He sat motionless and rigid in the heavy chair, unable even to move his head from side to side. Notwithstanding the haste in which they worked, the slaves had performed their task well. Save for the twitching of an eyelid he could not move a muscle.

The innocent looking opening in the ceiling entranced him. Try as he would he could not prevent his gaze resting upon it. He sat staring at the opening, momentarily expecting the advance guard of that flood which in a few brief but agonizing moments would destroy his ambitions with his life. His thoughts took a speculative turn.

"How long will it take the waters to reach my head?" he asked himself.

He shuddered to think of the approaching agony and death, to sit there powerless and watch the insidious waters as they gradually, O so gradually, arose from foot to knee, to thigh, to breast, to chin, to——. He could not finish the scale. He shook convulsively in anticipation of the sensation. What agony it would be to watch and wait for the moment when the treacherous water, having reached the level of his mouth, mounted to his lip and the topmost particle wet his nose. Another moment and then would come the terrible gasping for breath, the agony of suffocation. The thought was crazing; each second seemed a millennium. In his torture he began to cry out.

"Curses on thy head, Vulmaran! Cursed, cursed be ye! May the gods visit thee with eternal agony. King of Susiana, thou! Halista, thy daughter-in-law! Never! Rather this a thousand times."

"O ye gods," he cried after a brief pause. "Prolong not my agony. Send the water now and send it quickly. End this suspense, this agony. Take me to thyself and let me live with thee."

"O Orma, my love, my love. Never more will I look into those dark eyes and see within myself enthroned. Remember me kindly, my loved one."

He fell to thinking of the Jewess and wondering how long before she would hear of his fate, if ever. As he thought of the days of suspense in store for his friends, it made him sad. He thought of the old man who for so long had been the only father he had ever known. Would any seek to avenge his

death? Suddenly he heard a strange scratching noise up in the pipe.

"What is that I hear in the pipe?" he cried. "Oh, the water is coming. Merodach, save me! Save me, Bel! Why doesn't the water come? Do they wait to make my agony the more intense? What is that? A foot! Two legs! A body! Thou Ulbar, art thou come to torment me in my suffering?"

The cause of the strange noise in the pipe was now apparent. Ulbar, the diminutive chief spy, had scrambled down through the opening and now stood before the prince.

"Leave me alone in my agony," cried the half-crazed man.

"Nay, O Prince, Ulbar comes as a friend; comes to undo the damage that he was forced to do by those above him. He alone of all the men in Babylon could save thee. This place is under his charge and he only knows its secret workings. Did not the father of Ulbar construct the room and arrange its machinery?"

"This is neither the time nor place for talk, however," he continued, as he advanced to the chair. "We must make haste. Those outside think thee dead long since, and will soon send for me to pump out the water."

"But the water has not yet been turned on," said the prisoner.

"That is not their fault. They did their part but Ulbar had unfastened the chains from the flood gate. They threw over the lever but only the chains moved. Come now and follow me."

While thus explaining the reason for the death chamber's non-performance of its duty, the dwarf had been busy cutting the straps with his dagger. The prince arose painfully, but, though stiff and sore, he could walk. Turning around he saw for the first time an opening in the floor behind the chair. On the under side of the floor was a sliding door that worked in a pair of grooves. This door pulled back from the corridor without, thus allowing the water to escape into a pit beneath. The combined efforts of the two men pushed the door back.

Sheshbazzar peered into the darkness beneath but could see nothing, so deep and impenetrable was the gloom.

"Jump," commanded his rescuer.

Trusting the dwarf implicitly, the prince let himself through the hole, hung by his arms from the floor a moment and then dropped, fully expecting to fall a considerable distance. To his surprise he landed instantly. So slight was the distance that his landing upon the hard pavement caused no pain to the soles of his feet although he wore only thin sandals. Ulbar followed.

"What place is this?" inquired the prince as the dwarf scrambled to his feet.

"This is a square pit intended to hold the water that drains from the room above. A lever in the corridor opens yonder door and the water soon runs off. Where we are standing the floor is almost level but from here it slopes down to a smaller pit beneath a high tower. In this tower an endless chain hung with buckets carries the water up and pours it back into the river whence it came."

"Can they stop the water flowing into the room above?"

"The water does not flow directly from the river but comes from a reservoir that holds exactly the quantity required to fill the room. This reservoir is filled from a pipe that leads from the river. It is filled beforehand whenever the chamber is to be used. At other times it is empty. Come, sir, we cannot wait. If we are to see the world above we must climb up yonder chain. It is our only avenue of escape."

The rattle of a chain was heard directly above them.

"Ha! They have opened the door above," said Ulbar. "A few moments more and they will enter the chamber. We must make haste. Follow me. Walk carefully; the floor slopes."

With one hand outstretched touching the shoulder of his rescuer Sheshbazzar followed, shuffling over the rapidly descending pavement. He stumbled several times, so stiff were his limbs from his previous constrained position, but he reached the edge of the second and smaller pit without accident. A faint

glimmer of light came down to them. Hanging in the pit were the buckets, their dim outlines barely discernible in the semi-darkness. Leaning out over the edge of the pit and looking up, Sheshbazzar could see the long line of buckets as they rose one above another in the tower enclosing them. Far above was the trough into which they poured their contents as they turned to descend.

Ulbar produced a stout rope from beneath his gown and, climbing down into the pit, he so secured the endless chain as to render it immovable, thereby making it safe for the climb.

"All is ready," said Ulbar. "I will go first and do thou follow about four buckets behind me."

Without further delay the little spy laid hold of the chain and drew himself up until he rested on the first bucket. Then on he went to the second, then to the third. When he had ascended about twelve feet, (the buckets being about three feet apart) Sheshbazzar followed him. Slowly, laboriously they made their way up foot by foot in the darkness. From bucket to bucket they drew themselves. It was a difficult climb. So frail were the buckets that they dare not trust them to bear their weight, but drew themselves up by sheer strength. It was little better than going up a rope hand over hand.

At last Ulbar drew himself out upon the trough into which the buckets emptied. He called to his companion to stop while he looked about to see if the way was clear. Only a moment did he allow himself the luxury of rest. Standing in the trough, he looked out through the opening at the top of the shaft. The night was now as dark as any plotter could desire. The brilliant moon, whose knight-errant rays had penetrated into the shaft and assisted in their escape, had now disappeared behind some gathering clouds in the west. A few feet beneath flowed the Euphrates, still and dark. Not a sound was heard, not even the cry of a bird. Dark and quiet, it was the moment for an escape.

"Come," called Ulbar.

The last few feet of that terrible climb were soon passed and the rescued prince drew himself up beside his rescuer.

"My service to thee must end here," said Ulbar. "Here I was ordered to await the signal to start the pails. That order must soon come and if I am not here, suspicion will fall upon me. Climb down the trough and drop into the river. It is but a few feet. Directly opposite here is a brick quay, small and unused. Lying on that quay is a bundle of clothing which thou must put on. Wrap up thine own clothing in the same way; place in the bundle a stone that thou wilt find; tie it securely with a rope that I have provided, and then throw it into the river. In a small jar thou wilt find some stain, which applied to thy skin will make thee appear as an Arab. Go from Babylon for a time, my Prince. Now go, I beg thee. Vulmaran may send for me at any moment."

"One word only," said the prince. "I will not stay to tell thee how grateful I am to thee for thus saving my life, but before I go, tell me Ulbar, what prompted thee to this act."

"Against my will, Prince, I was forced to bear witness against thee. To clear my conscience I have done what I could to undo the mischief caused by my lies."

"When Sheshbazzar returns, Ulbar, I hope he can repay thee for this night's service."

"In seeing thee alive and realizing that the noble line of Nebuchadnezzar is not cut off, I am fully rewarded. Go now, I beseech thee."

Without a moment's hesitation Sheshbazzar crawled down the trough, hung for a moment on its outer end and then dropped into the river. Hardly had the sound caused by his striking the water died away when the door of the shaft was opened and a slave came in to order the pails started.

By the time Sheshbazzar struck out for the opposite shore the swift current had carried him several feet below the palace. The swimmer allowed for this and took his course diagonally across toward the unused quay. At this point, which even in the darkness he perceived to be well below the palace proper,

the river was exceedingly narrow as if to make up for its great width only a few rods above. Therefore the current was very swift and it required great exertion on his part to reach the shore. When at last he drew himself out upon the quay he was nearly exhausted. The trials of the preceding day, the nervousness caused by his confinement, his interview with Vulmaran and the great physical exertions of his escape, combined to produce this result.

It required all the will power of his naturally strong character to resist the temptation to lie there on the quay and rest, but the thoughts of possible dangers ahead spurred him on. Quickly and quietly he removed his garments and substituted the coarse Arab dress provided by Ulbar. Then by rubbing the stain over his face, neck and hands he became a veritable son of the desert. He was careful to use the stain sparingly, fully realizing the necessity of always having some of it about him in order to keep up his disguise.

Immediately after the rab mag's messenger had departed, Ulbar left the tower and followed the slave down into the labyrinth leading to the dungeons. Vulmaran and two slaves still remained outside the drowning chamber. Ulbar broke into a run that the rab mag would believe he had hurried all the way.

"The machinery is broken," he cried as he reached the group. "I cannot move the chain."

"What meanest that?" exclaimed Vulmaran.

"Never before has it failed to work," answered the dwarf.

"Will the pit beneath hold all the water that the chamber contains?"

"It will," replied the spy.

"Then open the door at once. The water must have escaped by this time. I am impatient to behold this man's body. A strange presentiment tells me that he has foiled me even now. Open, open and let me see yon water-soaked corpse."

The slaves undid the bars that fastened the great water-tight door. Vulmaran grasped the handle of the door and swung

it open. There inside the room stood the empty chair, its cut straps dangling from its back and arms.

"Foiled again, by Merodach!" cried Vulmaran.

"Yea and by the gods themselves," he added. "No human power could have saved him."

He turned to Ulbar as if a suspicion of the truth entered his mind, but the little spy returned his gaze with such stony calmness as to disarm the rab mag. An exclamation from one of the slaves drew the attention of the foiled murderer. Vulmaran turned at the cry. The Susianian was standing beside the wall. He touched the stonework and held his hand out mutely to the rab mag. Vulmaran grasped the man's meaning at once and touched the wall. His hand was dry after touching walls that in the ordinary course of affairs should have been water-soaked.

"By Nebo! Even our father Euphrates has failed us," he cried.

He turned angrily to the slaves.

"Did ye not open the gate?" he asked.

"Yea, sir," answered one, "we threw the lever over as far as it would go."

Vulmaran turned away, a look of chagrin upon his countenance. He ordered Ulbar to investigate the cause of the failure and repair whatever damage he found. After giving this order he left the gloomy place. He walked through dark passages, around sharp corners and up long flights of steps toward the palace. It was daylight when he passed through the last low archway and entered one of the spacious halls of the royal residence. His presence in the palace was so common at all hours of the day or night that no voice questioned him, no hindrance was placed upon his actions, no tongue reported his movements. He passed through the building and out at one of its smaller entrances, giving upon a gate in the wall. The sentry at the portal allowed him to pass, and in a few moments the illustrious rab mag of Babylon was walking sedately through one of its principal streets toward his own princely

residence. Not one of the persons who saluted him that morning could judge of the fires of rage, ambition and disappointment burning so fiercely beneath that calm and dignified exterior.

CHAPTER XIX

THREE WOMEN

Nitocris, twice queen of Babylon and born princess of Egypt, of all women on earth should have been happy. But what happiness can life hold for any woman of high and lofty sentiments and pure heart, wedded to a man, king though he be, whose tastes and desires are hardly higher than a beast's? The mother of Sheshbazzar was as much above her husband in a spiritual and moral sense as an angel is above the best of mankind. She loathed and hated her sensual drunken husband and that loathing extended to her own son, the offspring of a distasteful wedlock.

Of all the sentiments of human souls that actuate human actions, duty is the most severe. Duty was the god to which Nitocris bowed with all the ardor of the sternest devotee. From that terrible hour in which a treacherous sword had robbed her of a husband in mind and soul her equal, but one thought had guided her, but one ambition actuated her. From that hour it became her duty, a duty religiously adhered to, to avenge her husband's death and place her son upon his father's throne. When in the agonizing throes of child-birth she had thought only of giving Babylon a ruler. On through the perils of babyhood (for did not babies wail when teething, twenty-five centuries ago) she had watched over and cared for the helpless child, always thinking of the future, thinking of her pride at seeing him march home at the head of his victorious army, followed by long trains of captives and treasure-laden mules. She had dreamed too of days of peace, days in which she could see

her artistic dreams for the city worked out. She had dreamed of noble buildings and palatial gardens, the result of her plans but carried out by her son.

Then came the murder and usurpation. The babe was rescued but never more would he know a mother's care. She had watched him as best she could. Her heart leaped at seeing him ruddy and sturdy, playing in and about the temple. Then came another murder and usurpation, landing Nabonidos upon the throne. One day a royal retinue drew up before the humble cottage in which her widowhood had been passed. A kneeling monarch had begged her to become his queen. Her woman's nature had rebelled against being forever united to as notorious a libertine as was the pleading king, but her duty again controlled her. That she might be the better enabled to further her son's interests she had consented.

One day she had realized that she was to become a mother for the third time. Oh, the agony of the thought. A child to Nabonidos! She hated the unborn embryo. After the babe was born, a weak puny thing, her mother love asserted itself for a time and she kept the spark of life within the fragile body. For a few years thereafter her mind dwelt upon her youngest child, but not for long. Was it not Nitocris who had suggested to the king the summoning to the palace of Nabomuran, the chief priest's son, he who excelled all others in athletic and warlike sports, that the boy Belshazzar might imbibe some of the young soldier's qualities. Incidentally she thus brought the young man to the king's notice, thereby causing his preferment. She had soon discovered Belshazzar's weaknesses and she gave up all hope of making a man of him. She therefore began planning for her firstborn.

Many and many a time had she endeavored to bring about an interview with her son, but every time she had been foiled. Her position as queen balked her. At last, desperate, she had boldly sent for him upon the night of the banquet, when she knew that both her husband and her younger son would be safely occupied.

This fair June morning she sat in her boudoir, meditating upon her elder son and his prospects in life. Elmura her little waiting maid, who was also in the rab mag's employ, came in to announce the presence of Ulbar who desired an immediate audience. Nitocris arose at once and passed through the archway into the reception room.

Ulbar advanced cautiously, dropping upon one knee as the queen approached.

"Is all well?" inquired the queen in a low tone.

In a like manner of voice the little man told her of Sheshbazzar's mishaps, ending with an account of his escape. Tears were in the queen's eyes when he finished. At that moment she regretted making the announcement to the prince. Suddenly she thought of how the rab mag had obtained his information, and she turned quickly toward Elmura who was standing in the room but out of earshot.

"Thou little traitress," she cried, "leave me at once and never let me see thy face again. Thou mayest be thankful that I let thee off so easily."

The maid sulkily left the room and the queen turned again to Ulbar.

"Arise," she said, "he who saves the life of Babylon's hope kneels to the gods alone."

A glad smile illumined the face of the dwarf, for the moment lessening the repulsiveness of his features. Such words were rare in his ears, he who had always served hard masters.

"Wilt thou not be in danger as a result of thine act?" asked the queen.

"I fear no one," he replied, "my life has not been spent in secret ways for naught. Oh Bel, that mine eyes could forget some of the sights they have seen."

A servant entered and approached the queen.

"A Jewish woman desires to speak with thee and refuses to go until she has seen thee," he said.

"Bid her enter," commanded Nitocris.

A white-clad figure entered the room.

"Bide thou here a few moments, Ulbar and I will speak with thee again. Come," she said addressing the Jewess.

The queen re-entered her boudoir, followed closely by the white-clad figure. When they were inside Nitocris drew the curtains together and crossed the room to a divan. She motioned her visitor to a seat beside her upon the divan.

"I know who thou art," whispered the queen. "Thou art the Jewish girl Sheshbazzar loves. Orma I think was the name."

"I am Orma, the daughter of Nehum," was the girl's simple answer.

The queen took hold of the cape that her visitor wore about her head and, throwing it back upon her shoulders, gazed earnestly into the face of her son's beloved.

"Ah, Sheshbazzar!" she exclaimed. "Who can blame thee? Such beauty as this is rare even in Egypt."

Orma blushed and hung her head, but still she was pleased. Why should she not be? What woman but would like to be called beautiful by another whose own charms were praised in many lands?

"I come," said Orma presently, "with a message from the prince. He has escaped from the hands of his enemies and is now far outside the city. He journeys toward the southwest, there to seek a home among the wanderers of the desert. He knows not how long he shall be gone. Some day he will return. Should his presence be required before he returns he bids us send a trusty messenger to search him out."

"Alas!" cried the queen, tears springing to her eyes, "is it thus Babylon's king leaves to make his home among the wild nomads of the desert?"

"Should it become necessary to send for him I will be the messenger," said Orma.

"Thou?" exclaimed Nitocris. "Why girl, it would be foolhardy in thee."

"Nay queen, I only have seen him in his disguise and I alone would recognize him."

Before either had opportunity to continue the subject another woman entered. It was Haslita come to see her new-found mother, for on the morning following her revelation to Sheshbazzar, Nitocris had taken her beautiful daughter in her arms and told her all. As she entered, she stopped a moment in the archway, one arm upholding the heavy curtain, the other hanging loosely by her side. Her lips were parted from surprise at seeing a visitor in that apartment which few entered. As she stood thus, her figure clad in white outlined against the dark draperies, she made a picture fit for a master's brush. Orma gazed upon her with interest and admiration. As she gazed she thought of Sheshbazzar's putting her beauty before his sister's and at the remembrance she smiled, a smile that the newcomer construed as a greeting. Halista advanced to the divan and bending over kissed the high white forehead of her queen-mother. Then as if actuated by a sudden impulse she placed one arm about Orma's neck and kissed her in the most sisterly fashion.

"This dear girl brings us news of him we love," said the queen.

In a few words she repeated to Halista all that she knew concerning Sheshbazzar and his present whereabouts. She concluded with Orma's resolution to seek out the prince should his presence become imperative.

"I will go with thee," cried Halista enthusiastically.

"When will be the proper time for us to send for him?" asked the practical queen.

The joyous light faded from four black eyes. When, ah when? It was a difficult question. In all Babylon the three women seemed to be alone. They wished that Sheshbazzar could have hidden in Babylon where they could seek his advice as it was needed. Long they continued their discussion.

"Oh that I were a man," cried Nitocris. "All my life have I felt the limitations of my sex but never so fully as at this moment. If we were three men instead of three women we could lay plans and carry them out. As it is we are helpless."

"Say not helpless, mother. A woman's influence is her power. What she cannot accomplish alone she can persuade men to do for her. Can we not plan for our prince and enlist men to carry out our plans?" said Halista.

"Perhaps we can," replied Nitocris.

"How many men are there we can rely upon?" asked Halista.

"Let me see," mused the queen, "there is Ulbar. Then we can surely be confident of Belibus. Thou Halista, can enlist him in our cause."

"My influence in that direction will be unnecessary, mother," said the princess blushing. "Belibus already loves the prince as a brother."

"With Belibus will go his hundred warriors, all men of birth and influence. Their value to our cause cannot be estimated."

"Can the chief priest also be considered?" asked Orma, loath to obtrude her ideas upon them.

"Surely," replied the queen smiling, "his is a power little less than the king's."

"Oh," she cried joyously, "I feel as if our prince was on the road to the throne already."

A few moments later Orma announced her intention of departing. As their informal meeting broke up all three felt that the first steps of an infant monarchy had been taken, but as the first steps of even the greatest men are slow, weak and unsteady, so this plot (if that unpleasant word must be used) started weakly and uncertainly. Would that we could describe its footsteps as growing stronger, ever stronger, but alas! history, that stern unbending recorder of the world's events, lays out a dead line for the romancer and seems to command: "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther." Already up in the northeast a great warrior, backed by armies almost innumerable, is laying plans and how can the plans of three weak women stand before the desires of an Asiatic conqueror. Still from out that plot emerged men and women tested and tried, fitted to carry

on a work far more important than the resuscitation of a dying empire, a work whose results are apparent at the present day.

Orma left the queen's boudoir in spirits raised far above their wonted level. She had sat beside Babylon's queen and princess, had been their confidant, but above all they had silently, but none the less surely, approved of her as the prince's love. Notwithstanding their present relations, forbidden by her father to meet, Orma felt assured that such love as theirs would surmount all obstacles. With this thought in her mind she regarded the kindness of queen and princess as a good omen. If only Sheshbazzar would look toward Jehovah!

Muffled in her cloak in order to hide her features, she passed out through the queen's reception room, where Ulbar still awaited the queen's pleasure. At the doorway a servant stepped to her side. He conducted her through the many halls and passages leading from the queen's apartments to the outer portal. As she passed out she brushed against a man just entering the building. The contact caused her to loosen her hold upon the cape and it dropped back upon her shoulders. Before she could replace it, the man had thrown one quick penetrating glance into her face. The man was the rab mag, Vulmaran. Turning to a young fellow standing beside the doorway, he commanded: "Follow that woman and report to me."

Orma passed out and hurried down the broad steps. She walked rapidly homeward, looking neither to the right nor the left. All the way from the palace to her home she was followed by the spy. When she turned into the pathway leading up to the house he quickly noted the surroundings and withdrew.

Meanwhile an interesting interview was in progress at the palace. Vulmaran was hastening to the presence of the king when he accidentally brushed against the Jewess. It was from no spirit of idle curiosity that the wily rab mag ordered one of his many tools to follow her. Not for a single moment had the miraculous escape of Sheshbazzar been absent from his thoughts but, as the time passed into hours since that disappointing moment when the open door of the drowning chamber had

revealed to him the failure of his plans, he began more and more to doubt the miraculousness of the prince's escape. Impossible as it seemed, some person or persons must have fathomed the secrets of the drowning chamber and planned the successful escape of the prince.

It was while in this frame of mind that the rab mag entered the great library which throughout the reigns of the present monarchs was used as a reception room. Both kings were present and alone, a most opportune moment for Vulmaran. Notwithstanding that the government of Babylon was essentially despotic, it yet embraced certain democratic features, chief of which was the accessibility of the monarch. No ruler of modern times is more easily approached on matters of importance than were the kings of Babylon. Rarely throughout those hours of the day set aside for the affairs of state were the monarchs alone in their official apartment.

Vulmaran approached the dais upon which the monarchs sat in their twin thrones. He bowed low with the studied obsequiousness that he always affected.

"May the blessings of our lord, Bel rest upon thee this day and may his favor shine upon thee," he said deferentially.

"Peace be with thee," replied the elder monarch.

"How prosper matters?" he asked almost in the same breath.

"Badly, very badly, O King. Our prisoner has escaped."

"Escaped!" cried Nabonidos, springing to his feet and bringing his fist down upon the small table beside his throne. "Then thou shalt be held responsible. Unless that man is back in our prison within a twelvemonth, thou, Vulmaran shalt die in his place."

CHAPTER XX

FAREWELL TO HOME

The first rays of the rising sun were gilding the roof of the temple shrine. The clear, limpid water of the great moat

without the outer wall rippled against the brick embankment, each tiny globule a glittering crystal of light. The atmosphere was hazy, damp with the early mist from the river. All was silent. Dame Nature alone was awake. Man, the creature of the day, was yet sleeping, unconscious of the glories that he missed. As under healthy conditions a man is at his best when he first awakes from slumber, possessed of a rested body and a clear mind, so methinks it is with Nature. With the refreshing dew still undried and the clear rays of the morning sun shining down upon her, she is at her best. The birds twitter their sweetest songs after their first drink at some crystal spring. The insects buzz their loudest. The hoarse croaking of the frog and the dismal hoot of the owl are hushed for the time and all is peaceful and serene.

Upon this particular June morning B.C. 539, all was quiet and peaceful. The luxuriant vegetation of the rich Chaldean soil swayed gently before the cool breeze from the south that even at this distance carried news of the sea. Birds sang and twittered in great glee, flitting in and out among the stalks of golden grain. It was a morning to gladden the heart, yet the only human being among these beautiful scenes was sad, lonely and oppressed. Moreover his was a heart unused to such feelings, but the previous happiness only accentuated the present misery.

Upon the summit of the first hill south of Babylon that was crossed by the Borsipian road stood a tomb that for the era of its construction was a work of some magnitude. Owing to the great distance it had to be transported, stone was little used for building purposes, but the Babylonian builder used brick to an extent that makes his achievements a wonder to moderns. Of all the tombs that lined the great thoroughfare, the one mentioned was the most imposing. Although more than a century and a half old it was in a condition of repair and preservation that should shame us—for think of the resting places of our heroes who have been dead a century and a half or even much less!

The tomb was constructed of sun-baked brick covered with an outside course of kiln-baked brick, ornamented with bas-reliefs. It resembled in shape a small chapel and was approached by a flight of eight broad steps, each step a single block of stone. The opening in the tomb was closed by a single slab securely cemented in place. This stone was covered with inscriptions setting forth the achievements of the man whose dust reposed within. A noble record it was, for he in whose honor this structure had been erected was none other than the great national hero, Merodach-Baladan.

What William Wallace was to Scotland this warrior chieftain was to Babylonia. For many years he had resisted the inroads of Assyria. At length he had been captured and carried prisoner to Nineveh. He escaped from his prison soon after the death of Sargon and again assumed the rule of his land; but all in vain. After a brief reign he was defeated by Sennacherib (B.C. 703) and driven into exile where he died. Ten years after his death a few faithful followers sought his grave, carried his remains to Babylon and over them erected this mausoleum.

Upon the lower of the eight steps leading up to the tomb, sat a traveler, the only human figure in the vast scene of beauty our feeble pen has sought to describe. His face was buried in his hands and an occasional sob escaped him. His whole attitude was expressive of the deepest dejection. Beneath at his feet a tiny lark picking here and there and chirping contentedly, would occasionally lift its pretty head and eye the traveler curiously, its little brain unable to understand how anyone could be sad this morning.

At length the traveler raised his head and straightened himself with an air of determination. He looked about him as if ashamed of having given way before his grief and fearful lest some spectator had seen his weakness. The skin and dress were those of an Arab wanderer; the features were those of Sheshbazzar, prince of Babylon. He arose, pushed back the long hair from his forehead and made a complete survey of his surroundings. Then turning about, he faced the tomb. Noticing

the inscription upon the stone door he ascended the steps and knelt upon the topmost one while he perused the record of the dead hero. After a careful examination he arose and took one step backward. Throwing up his arms toward Heaven, he cried:

“Oh Merodach, grant that the fate of this great man may not be mine. Grant that the end he failed to reach may be reached by me. Grant that the loving government he dreamed of, I may establish. Now, Father Merodach go with me. Let thy blessing follow me wherever I go. Carry me through the dangers and trials of the desert and bring me back in safety to mine own land and mine own people.”

He turned away from the tomb and gazed up and down the road. A sign of life in the direction of Babylon arrested his attention. Shading his eyes with his hand, he gazed long and earnestly at the object. A horseman was surely approaching and even at this distance the fugitive could see by the man's carriage that he was a soldier. Escape was impossible, so Sheshbazzar seated himself upon the steps to await the passing of the horseman. He hoped that he would be unnoticed or, if seen, he hoped that his disguise was complete enough to protect him. The horse's hoof beats sounded clear and distinct upon the hard surface of the road. As the man approached the exile raised his head in wonder. Surely his eyes saw something familiar about the steed whose stride was so long, whose head was held so high and whose small hoofs seemed to spurn the ground. No! It cannot be! Yes! It is, it is! The approaching horse was Saru, the prince's own faithful steed. A moment later the rider was also recognized. The prince waved his hand, and the horse came to a standstill. Its rider threw himself to the ground. The prince ran joyously to meet him and embraced him warmly. When they separated he turned to fondle Saru. After petting the horse for a moment he turned again to the rider.

“Tell me my Belibus, what brings thee abroad this morning,” he said.

"I am come, Prince Sheshbazzar——," began the new commander of the Winged Lions.

"Why callest thou me by that name?" interrupted the prince.

"Fear not, my prince. Thy name and titles are now known unto me and here, by the tomb of the great soldier whose memory we revere, I give thee mine homage and offer thee my sword, my life and all I have."

"Arise my brother," commanded the fugitive. "It is not right that the general of the king should kneel to a man without a name, without a home, without a country."

"Nay, prince, 'tis to the descendant of the great Nebuchadnezzar that I kneel. Who was it, prince, that selected from among the troopers of the Winged Lions one of the poorest members of the band and raised him to the position of lieutenant? I tell thee, sir, my gratitude for that act shall last forever."

"Belibus, thou art indeed a friend. What other man in Babylon would risk reputation, even life, to come after me and bring me my horse. Yea Belibus, I perceive thy intention; I accept thy service and right glad am I to have the company of this noble animal in my wanderings. Return now my friend and brother. Reach the city before thine absence can be noticed. The memory of thine act shall accompany me and comfort me in the dark hours that I realize lie ahead."

A glance at the sun called attention to the flight of time. It was expedient, therefore, that they should part. After a final embrace they kissed and with a parting word, separated. A moment later a thought came to the prince and he called Belibus back.

"Remember me to the queen and Halista. Thou hast my approval of thy love for the princess, Belibus. I knew not of thy feelings until Nergalshazzar spoke of them, but nothing would give me greater pleasure than to hail thee as brother. My mother and sister will hear of me through Orma. I stopped there early this morning and saw her father. He kindly called his daughter and I had opportunity of bidding my love

farewell. I give her into thy charge, Belibus. Watch over her and see that no harm befalls her.

"Ere a twelvemonth passes I will be back with thee again. Should my presence be desired before I return I can be found among the tribes of the desert. Send for me if I am needed. Let the messenger but tell the story of yonder Merodach-Baladan, his wars and his loves and I will make myself known. One more word, Belibus; who told thee of my name and rank and directed thee as to my route?"

"Ulbar," answered the soldier.

"So I thought. Now again farewell, my Belibus. May the gods keep and prosper thee."

"Farewell my prince. May Bel go with thee and bring thee back again in safety to rule thy country and thy people."

They embraced again and then parted. The pseudo-Arab mounted Saru and the gallant soldier turned toward Babylon. Sheshbazzar rode to the summit of the next elevation and drew rein, turning in his saddle for a last look upon the city of his love.

"Ah Babylon," he cried, "is this the way thou sendest forth thy rightful sovereign? Clad in the vestures of a wanderer and with darkened skin, he leaves thee in the night when thou sleepest and cannot bid him farewell. He shall return unto his mistress and she shall bow before him. She sends him forth without a parting word. She shall welcome him again with trumpets."

After thus addressing the proud city, he took a last long look as a man would gaze upon his love. Then turning about, he chirruped to Saru. The horse darted forward down the opposite declivity and in a moment Babylon was lost to view, save only for the topmost pinnacle of the great temple.

An hour and a half later he galloped through the low archway into the court of the great khan at Borsippa. The first stage of his journey was over. Here he decided to spend the night, hoping thereby to find a congenial company that would accept him as a traveling companion. The many bands who

had journeyed to Babylon to witness the coronation were now returning to their homes, and he hoped to find among them one that would give him company and shelter.

The Lion of Borsippa was without doubt the foremost hostelry of ancient times. Located as it was in the holy city of the great empire whither thousands journeyed annually to pay their homage to Nebo, its patronage was extensive. It was a low rambling sort of building, but with an imposing façade upon the temple street. It was built in the form of a hollow square and occupied an entire city block. It was within hailing distance of the great temple, the magnet that drew the crowds hither. The khan faced upon the temple street but its entrance was upon the highway here known as the Babylonian road. The entrance was a low vaulted archway surmounted by a great clay lion.

As Sheshbazzar alighted in the courtyard a servant and a boy advanced to meet him. The boy took charge of the horse while the servant conducted the traveler to his apartment. They traversed the entire length of the courtyard, passing interesting groups, representative of all the surroundings nations. The apartment assigned the prince was in the farther corner of the building. He entered and made a hasty survey of the room. Its furnishings though simple were yet complete. The exile was satisfied with his accommodations. In his present weary state no couch would be unacceptable. A glance at the sun showed the nearness of the dinner hour. The prince took one of the stools and carried it out into the courtyard, and seated himself thereon, intending to while away the time until dinner was served by watching his fellow guests.

Various groups of travelers were scattered about the courtyard, but the solitary exile was concerned with but one. Near the center of the enclosure was camped a company of Arabs, such a band as he hoped to join. He watched them intently as they spread their gaily colored cloths upon the hard brick floor of the courtyard and prepared their meal. This was a privilege accorded guests, they being allowed even to construct

booths and pitch tents within the enclosure. The party of Arabs consisted of a dozen or more persons, including three women and two children. The leader was a young man of prepossessing appearance, tall and straight with long flowing black hair, eyes the hue of an Arabian night and a complexion of rich brown.

Everything about the young man drew the fugitive toward him. As his eyes followed the sheik, the determination to form his acquaintance and seek permission to join the band came into the prince's mind. His intention was postponed, however, by the summons to dinner. The fugitive hurried across the yard to the long apartment where the meals were served.

When he passed the group of Arabs upon his return from dinner, they had not only finished partaking of their refreshments but all vestiges of victuals and utensils had been removed. The exile lingered about the group, hoping to find the leader that he might prefer his request, but the sheik had disappeared. Sheshbazzar returned to his apartment. He removed his outer garment and lay down upon the couch. In a moment he was asleep.

The afternoon was well advanced when he awoke and sat up. After rearranging his costume he left the room and strolled out into the courtyard. He found the young sheik standing alone beside a tent his band had erected. The prince hastened to the Arab's side.

"May I have a word with thee?" he asked.

The Arab turned quickly and made a rapid survey of the prince's person.

"Say on stranger. I listen," he said.

"It is unnecessary to ask for secrecy, I trust," said the prince.

"Stranger," returned the Arab, "the ears of Almada are open but his mouth is closed."

"Then good Almada," continued the fugitive, "I am not what my appearance denotes. I am not an Arab but a Babylonian. I am an exile driven I know not whither, a man

forced to leave country, loved ones, everything earth holds dear and seek a home among strangers.

"From the moment I entered this place I have intended to speak with thee. Now is the time when we are alone. Therefore, good Almada, I ask thee to take me into thy party and let me accompany thee on thy way. Let me journey with thee. Where thou tentest I will tent; where thou eatest I will eat; where thou drinkest I will drink. If thou hast wars they shall be my wars and I will draw my sword as one of thine own people. I ask naught but thy comradeship and friendship. That which I eat and drink I can pay thee for."

"Stranger, thou askest much. We are a strange people, loving only our own, wandering from place to place, searching for grass and water and a market for our wares. We have no homes save yonder tents of skin; we have no abiding place save the desert. Each night we camp at a different spot; each morning we are on our way again. Sometimes we are hungry; often we are thirsty. It is a hard poor life, especially for one used to the courts of yonder brilliant city. Still such as is our life, thou art welcome to share it if thou wilt."

"Thanks, noble Almada," said the prince gratefully. "Henceforth I am one of thy tribe."

"Thy name, stranger?" asked the sheik.

"Kadasman," replied the exile.

CHAPTER XXI

A REBEL IN PRISON

When Heber the son of Nehum acknowledged himself vanquished by that tower of might, Belibus, he passed into the old palace as ordered. He kept his honor sacredly and when, after the death of Nergalshazzar, the soldiers returned to their duties he was found seated upon a divan in the great hall of the building.

"True to thy word, I see," said Belibus.

"I am here, sir," replied Heber, "awaiting my fate whatever it may be."

"That is not my affair," answered Belibus. "It is my duty to turn thee over to the king's guard. Thou wilt have a trial and receive whatever sentence the king sees fit to bestow."

"Rather I had met death at thy hands than be executed at the king's command," said Heber.

"I have never yet slain a man after he acknowledged himself vanquished," replied the lieutenant coldly.

Heber was placed in the charge of two soldiers who guarded him through the remainder of the night. The following morning, the coronation day, he was carried across the river to the palace, hurriedly tried and promptly sentenced to death. Immediately after sentence had been passed he was blindfolded and led down through the labyrinth to the prison beneath the river. He was placed in a cell, the door was securely fastened and the guard left him alone to himself and his thoughts.

After the door of his cell had been closed and barred Heber took an inventory of his surroundings. As a cell almost the exact counterpart of this has already figured in these pages a description would be a useless repetition. If anything Heber's cell was more comfortable than the one subsequently occupied by Sheshbazzar. It was one tier higher up and therefore nearer the light and air that came down through the labyrinthian passages. One feature of this prison was the classification of its inmates. Beginning near the entrance the cells were large, well lighted and ventilated. From these they graded down to the damp dark dungeons of the lowest tier. Thus mild offenders had a comparatively comfortable incarceration, even though it might be for life, while such unfortunates as aroused the deepest anger of the king were thrust into the deepest dungeon, there to rot their life away in a manner unimaginable to modern minds; unless perchance they were soon sent to the drowning chamber, which death, horrible though it was, was yet preferable to the slow rot of a long imprisonment.

The two first days of Heber's confinement passed uneventfully. His mind was not thoroughly alive to his approaching fate, nor did contrition for his deeds yet disturb him. Upon arising on the third morning, however, the realization of his sentence came upon him with a suddenness and vividness that was crushing. He knew death to be in store for him but in accordance with the custom of Nabonidos, no time was set for his execution. It might come at any moment or it might be deferred indefinitely. It was the refinement of cruelty to compel a prisoner to arise each morning with the feeling that it might be his last day on earth.

Heber sat upon the edge of his cot. He buried his face in his hands. The face thus hidden was ashen gray, his muscles were tense and stiff, cold beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead. Youth and death are antipodes. To old age death appears as a kind reliever; to the youth he is a horrible monster whose coming is the one great calamity to be dreaded. Yet how familiar he is to youth. How oft does he pass by the decrepit and seize a man in the very prime of his strength. Thus to Heber his approaching death was a horrible nightmare. He endeavored to fix his mind upon other matters, his home, his loved ones, but his will was not sufficiently strong to enable him to govern his thoughts. Ever his mind dwelt upon his fate and upon that alone.

His mood was interrupted by the entrance of a slave bearing his plain breakfast. His entrance aroused Heber and the condemned man arose to greet the slave. No expressions of kindness or sympathy could he discover upon that dark forbidding countenance. The slave neither spoke to nor looked at the prisoner. Heber endeavored to question him.

"When am I to suffer the death?" he asked.

The slave shook his head and opening his mouth, pointed into the tongueless cavity. The slaves of the royal prison told no tales!

This day was the longest of Heber's whole life. His cell was so located that day and night were easily distinguished. In-

deed at midday his eye could take in all his surroundings, whereas on the tier below a prisoner was obliged to grope at all hours. Therefore when the light began to dwindle Heber knew that evening was approaching and he began to look forward to his supper. The same slave came shortly bearing a supper the exact duplicate of his breakfast. After the slave withdrew Heber attacked the food with great gusto, although it consisted only of a coarse wheaten cake and a jug of water. Where a man is allowed but two meals a day, all food is acceptable.

After the slave had returned and carried away the empty dishes Heber stretched himself upon the couch. As he lay there in the dim twilight the events of the past few days passed in review before him. They so crowded upon one another as to form a confused mass in his brain. Particularly did his mind dwell upon the days spent in the desert, when day after day he rode beside the young chieftain who had been so kind a master. This train of thought led him gradually to the beautiful Tirmar for love of whom he had taken part in the rebellion. His brow clouded as he thought of his evil genius, but even at this moment he realized how completely he was within her power and how, were she present she would rule him. He began to feel less dread for the death that would release his soul from such bondage.

In his present frame of mind sleep was impossible and he would undoubtedly have lain awake all night, living his life over and over again. He realized this himself and it was therefore a relief when he heard the bar of his door being removed. A moment later a slave, his regular attendant, entered and after placing a lighted lamp upon the floor, instantly withdrew. As he passed out another man entered. He was plainly attired but was evidently a civil officer of some rank; at least his dress showed he was not of the army. The slave closed the door and remained outside on guard.

Heber arose from his couch and faced his visitor. But one thought was suggested by this visitation:

"I suppose the time of my execution has arrived," he said putting on a bold face.

"Nay," replied the newcomer. "'Tis life not death I bring. Mine is a pleasant errand. I am come to make thee a free man."

"Then the king has pardoned me," cried Heber, to whose mind the likelihood of such an act had been ever present.

"Hush, not so rapidly," said the officer in his soft, pleasant tones and holding up his right hand as if to command silence. "The king knows nothing of this visit, nor need he ever know. I am the rab mag. To me is entrusted the solemn duty of executing or of pardoning. Only the king has more power than I."

So Vulmaran was paying another midnight visit to the prison. Surely the illustrious rab mag never slept.

"If I am not pardoned how speakest thou of freedom?" asked Heber.

"It is I and not the king who would make thee free, my boy," answered the rab mag in his smoothest tones.

"Is there a condition to my pardon?" asked Heber slightly suspicious.

"I would require of thee some little service," was the reply.

"Is it a service that I can honorably accept?"

"It is a service of the greatest honor; a service that will save the empire from destruction."

"Of what benefit would it be to a Jew to save this empire?"

"Even a Jew may value his own life," insinuated Vulmaran.

Heber hesitated. While not a man possessed of keen perceptive faculties he yet saw that the rab mag had some unusual task he wished performed. He realized that convicted men were not given life and liberty for nothing. The desire to save himself was growing strong with him. A few moments before he had thought himself prepared to meet death bravely if not willingly. Now one word of hope had demolished the whole carefully raised structure.

Heber was of a weak nature. A superior will could always lead him. Even at the present moment, when his better self commanded him to refuse the rab mag's offer, fully suspecting the service required to be of a treacherous nature, he realized that he must eventually yield if Vulmaran persisted. The latter watched the Jew closely, noting every expression of his face that might furnish a clue to the thoughts behind. When he deemed the moment propitious he renewed the attack.

"Be seated," he said pointing to the couch.

Vulmaran drew up a stool and seated himself close beside his victim. He leaned over and spoke directly into the young man's face.

"Listen to me," he said. "Thou hast never heard of it but in this building there is a strange chamber used for a strange purpose. It is called a drowning chamber and in it the worst offenders are executed. For minor offences the sword is the mode of execution, but for such crimes as thine this wonderful room is used. The prisoner is bound to a stout chair, bound so securely that he cannot move a muscle. Then a gate is opened and water commences flowing into the room. It runs slowly, very slowly and the prisoner watches it as inch by inch it rises, cold and merciless. There is always a lighted lamp left in the room so the prisoner will have no difficulty in watching the water. The greater the king's displeasure the more slowly runs the water. It mounts slowly upward over the prisoner's feet to his knees, and up from his knees to his waist. On, on it goes, up to his shoulders, to his mouth, to his nose, and then——," the rab mag shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

Heber sat as still as a statue. Cold drops of perspiration stood out on his forehead as the realistic narrative of Vulmaran progressed. His long black hair clustered about his forehead in damp ringlets. His whole being was unnerved. He was as helpless clay in the hands of the potter. The rab mag saw his advantage and was quick to follow it up.

"This, my dear young friend, is the punishment I am ordered to mete out to thee this night. My orders are to let the water

run its slowest. I shall obey my instructions to the letter unless thou availlest thyself of my offer."

He paused for a moment but Heber remained silent.

"Well sir, which is it; life or death? I shall waste no more time with thee. Decide now," said Vulmaran impatiently.

"Name thy conditions," said Heber weakly. The rab mag smiled.

"Listen," he continued. "Last night a man was taken into yonder chamber to suffer the death he fully deserved. He was securely bound to the chair; the door was closed and secured. The water was turned on and those without waited patiently for the chamber to do its work. When the proper length of time had elapsed the door was opened. Inside stood the empty chair. The prisoner was gone and the walls of the room were dry. Some powerful friends of the man had rescued him in a manner deemed impossible. Thus, O Jew, was the will of the king thwarted and as I was in charge of the execution the king holds me responsible. Unless that man is captured within a twelvemonth I shall receive the death intended for him. Now then, young man, I offer thee life and liberty if thou wilt follow the escaped prisoner and when he is located bring me word. What is it now, life or death?"

Heber hesitated but an instant. The task seemed small enough.

"I accept thy conditions," he said.

"Good!" exclaimed the rab mag. "I will now give thee a few instructions for thy guidance. I have provided clothing to disguise thee and gold to pay thy way. Here is a pass that enables thee to get through any gate. Thou wilt leave the city by the Sippara road and journey northwards. Ulbar informs me that a man whose description tallies with that of him we seek was seen yesterday journeying northwards from the city. I suspect he will join the Medes and bring them down upon us. Follow him to the end of the world if needs be and if thou findest him, wealth and honor shall be thine."

"How looks the man and what is his name?" asked Heber.

"He is dressed all in white. He is tall and dark and handsome. He wears a black beard. As for his name, it is Sheshbazzar, but he is known unto thee as Nabomuran."

"Oh, my God! My master!" cried Heber.

CHAPTER XXII

HEBER'S QUEST

Shortly after daybreak Heber left the city by the Sippara road. He was attired as a Babylonian officer and mounted upon a fine horse. To all appearances he was an ordinary horseman bound upon a peaceful if not an enjoyable journey. He carried only the lightest of arms and armor barely sufficient to protect himself from wild animals. Slung from his saddle in a neat roll was a heavy cloak to wear should he be obliged to sleep under Heaven's roof alone or in case his quest carried him into northern latitudes.

The road at this hour was deserted and Heber had only his own gloomy thoughts as companions. The announcement of the name of the man whom he was to track had been a great blow and for an instant he contemplated refusing to accept his life upon such terms, but Vulmaran's description of the mode of death in store for him had been all too vivid and the young man lacked the strength to deliberately choose that death. So here he was started upon the long chase after the man he loved.

Heber supposed himself upon his master's track and felt assured he would ultimately find him. What action to take in that contingency was the question now troubling him as he rode along. His former love for the Babylonian had long since returned and now fully possessed him. It was greater than ever before. Therefore he liked not the idea of tracking him to his death. His mind suggested the finding of a place of security for himself and never letting Vulmaran hear from him

again, but it seemed both cowardly and treacherous. However, he told himself, he need not make the decision until his master's whereabouts were discovered.

The day passed uneventfully. He stopped by the wayside and partook of a coarse lunch provided by the rab mag. After an hour's rest in the shade of a group of palms, he remounted his horse and continued the journey. He rode slowly, hoping the man he sought would so gain upon him as to reach a place of safety. It was nearly nightfall when he entered Sippara. He rode leisurely through the streets to the inn. Here he received a hearty meal and was shown to a comfortable sleeping place. A servant took charge of his horse.

After partaking of the refreshment provided, Heber roamed about the enclosure inquiring of his fellow guests if any had seen a tall dark man clad all in white. Each time he put the question he feared lest some one of them would answer in the affirmative. He made a complete tour of the inn and from each guest received the same negative answer. He was about to return to his own apartment when he spied an old man sitting alone. Heber hastened to his side and put the oft-repeated question.

"Let me see," murmured the old man. "I remember meeting a man about twenty miles north of here. Yes, he was dressed all in white and he had a cloth about his head as if he had been injured."

"Was he mounted or on foot?" asked Heber.

"Mounted, but he knew not how to ride the horse," was the reply.

Heber thanked him and turned away. His fears were realized. He was following his master and less than a day's journey behind him. Either the prince had a slow horse or he was in no hurry. Mentally, Heber resolved that this distance should not be lessened, at least not until Babylon was miles behind. One detail of the old man's description struck him as strange. How happened it the commander of the Winged Lions, "knew not how to ride the horse"?

For three days Heber kept steadily on, following the track of the fugitive, yet never gaining upon him. At Duraba Heber learned that his quarry had left the main road, which kept on toward Nineveh. He was now journeying toward the north-east.

"Vulmaran was right," thought Heber. "He is going to join the Medes. My duty bids me follow but that is all. Once with the Medes Vulmaran may storm. We will both be beyond his reach."

This thought lifted a heavy load from the young man's mind and when he continued his journey the following morning he allowed his horse to proceed at a much faster pace, and soon reached the banks of the Tigris. At this point the river was unfordable and no means of crossing existing, Heber turned his horse's head upstream and followed the river bank until noon. Shortly after noon he stopped on the edge of a small wood for lunch and rest. He tied his horse to a tall tree while he stretched himself at full length upon the greensward.

After partaking of his refreshment, instead of sleeping an hour as had been his practice up to this time, he thought of whiling away a few moments exploring the woods. He looked to the comfort of his faithful beast and then stepped through the outermost clump of trees into the tangle beyond. His progress was slow and laborious. Pushing aside here a sapling, there a bush he pushed onward through the tangle, slipping in and out and zigzagging back and forth. A half hour's exertion brought him to the edge of an open glade fully thirty feet across. To his astonishment he found a horse quietly browsing within. He at once cast his eyes about the glade to discover the animal's rider. His search was short. Scarcely ten feet from the horse lay his master, asleep. The sleeper was the fugitive Heber had been following all these days.

Heber stood still in the edge of the wood, where he would be partially hidden should the sleeper suddenly awake, and gazed intently upon the features of the man before him. It surely was the one whose description had been furnished him.

All the points were there save the bandage which had been removed revealing a partially healed cut. Notwithstanding the sleeper so nearly agreed with the description, he was not Sheshbazzar or as Heber knew him, Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard. Yet the features seemed familiar. He surely had seen that face before but for a moment he could not identify the unconscious form. Suddenly it flashed into his mind. The supposed man was Tirmar, daughter of Josedek, and the slayer of Nergalshazzar.

Heber hesitated, thinking of his future action. His mission was now accomplished. Some one had blundered, perhaps purposely, in mistaking the fleeing conspirator for the pretender of Babylon. Heber felt that he must decide upon his course of action immediately. Possibly his duty demanded his return to Babylon, but Vulmaran had failed to give any directions as to his actions in case his quest was unsuccessful. Had he found the man he was seeking, his orders were to report the fugitive's whereabouts to the rab mag. Heber saw how useless it would be to continue his search for Sheshbazzar further. On the other hand he saw no reason for returning to Babylon. Moreover, it occurred to him that his return might embarrass Vulmaran.

He therefore decided that he would not return to Babylon, but where should he go? Where upon the earth's surface was there a refuge for a Jew? For a moment he considered journeying to Jerusalem but a remembrance of the barren, ruinous condition of his native land banished the idea. He next thought of the Medes. He remembered Rastagus who had been the guest of the Winged Lions upon the desert. Slowly the resolution to hunt up this man formed itself in his mind.

Suddenly the sleeping Tirmar awoke. Unconsciously while absorbed in his thoughts Heber had stepped out into the open. The movement was trifling but it was sufficient to place him in a position where he could be seen by the Jewess. Hardly were her eyes opened before she both saw and recognized him. She instantly sprang to her feet and advanced joyously to meet him. There was no time to retreat had he intended doing so.

"Oh, my Heber," she exclaimed, "hast thou come all this distance to seek me?"

"Nay, Tirmar," he replied. "I have been following thee by mistake, thy description having been furnished me for another's."

The eager expression on the woman's face died out. It was a bitter disappointment. Amazon though she was, she was yet a woman and loved Heber with a woman's love, made yet more intense by the fierce passionateness of her nature. It was denying her, this cold, matter-of-fact speech. Heber had not intended to hurt her but he showed her no tenderness. A few days back he had told himself he had conquered all love for this woman, that she could no longer dominate him. Now he was again looking into those eyes. Even through her disguise, dressed as she was in man's attire, he could see the outlines of her figure, the most wonderful in Babylon. Had Tirmar been a wanton riches and splendor might have been hers. Such beauty as she possessed could not well escape the eyes of even high-born votaries of pleasure, but her strong will had been her protection.

It is unnecessary to dwell longer upon the scene. Heber was a man and as a man he fell an easy prey to a woman's beauty. Again he was in her power but as he looked upon her he was glad this was so. The Tirmar before him was not the Tirmar who had urged him to rebellion. She was changed. At this moment her only ambition was to become his wife. They seated themselves side by side upon the grass and for an hour talked trivialities, as lovers have since Adam courted Eve in Paradise.

The slanting rays of the sun told them it was long past noon and therefore time for them to continue their journey if they wished to reach an abiding place before nightfall. Tirmar led her horse out through a narrow lane and Heber followed. Once in the open they passed around the woods to the spot where Heber had tied his horse. They mounted and rode away, following the river bank toward the north until they found a fordable place in the stream. The crossing was a difficult one

but at length they reached the opposite bank, tired and wet. That night they encamped under the stars and continued their journey in the morning.

Thus they rode on and on for five days. Once with Tirmar Heber gave up all discussion of his destination. She was bound for the camp of the Medes and Persians and where she went he would go. One night in a lonely farmer's hut, Tirmar had urged their marriage, so taking her hand in his, Heber repeated a simple vow. She followed and thus they became husband and wife. Simple and impromptu as was the ceremony both considered it binding and it was well. The vows thus made were faithfully kept.

Late in the forenoon of the sixth day after they had crossed the Tigris, they reached the outskirts of a vast military camp. It was located upon a far-stretching, rolling plain near the banks of the river Gyndes. Long rows of tents and bowers stretched away to a great distance, each row equally distant from its neighbors, with long straight avenues between. Down one of these avenues the travelers took their way, intending to inquire for the tent of Rastagus, of whom Heber had already told his wife. They were soon halted by a sentry who demanded their names, their destination and their business.

Briefly Heber stated that they were Jews from Babylon searching for one Rastagus, a high official of King Cyrus. The sentry ordered them to remain in their present position while he called an officer to hear their tale. He returned shortly accompanied by a young man whom Heber judged to be an officer of considerable rank. Again Heber went through his brief narrative. The officer listened attentively and as Heber progressed, a puzzled look came into his face.

"This man must have been of some rank but I fear thou art mistaken in his name. There is no officer in this army of that name as far as I am aware," said the officer.

Heber, bewildered and disappointed, turned to Tirmar. The officer scrutinized them keenly.

"I think thou hadst best state thine errand to the king," he

said a moment later. "Mayhap he will know what officer was near Babylon at that time. The king has but recently returned from a journey but he will undoubtedly see thee."

The officer led the way through the camp, followed closely by the two Jews. The distance they traversed was considerable. The vastness of the camp was a wonder to Heber. Accustomed though he was to martial affairs he had never yet seen such a body of soldiery gathered together. Their numbers were beyond calculation. Row upon row of tents and huts stretched away as far as the eye could see. Well-armed sentries were stationed at regular intervals through the camp. No disorder was manifest. Everything was conducted in a manner surprising to behold.

At length they reached a large open space in the center of the camp. Here upon a slight natural elevation was pitched the great pavilion of King Cyrus. Grouped about it were many smaller tents and two well built wooden structures, one evidently the culinary department of the king's household and the other the headquarters of the army from whence issued the orders that kept the whole vast mechanism under control.

Their conductor left them in a small tent close beside the central pavilion and bade them there await his return. He called up a sentry and bade him stand at the entrance. Heber judged from this act that the young officer was suspicious of them. Their wait was short, the officer returning soon with instructions for them to enter the King's tent. He opened the flap to the pavilion and motioned for them to precede him.

At the farther end of the tent, seated in a heavy but simple oaken chair, was Cyrus the Great, king of Anshan, Media and Persia. He was plainly attired in a military costume. Save for his heavy golden chain he could easily have been taken for any of his generals. The two Jews approached the famous conqueror with great deference. When near him they dropped upon their knees.

"Arise," commanded the king, "I desire to speak with thee plainly."

"Thou, Gobryas, stand at the entrance and prevent any interruption of the present interview." Thus commanded their conductor returned to the opposite end of the tent where he was out of hearing.

"This Rastagus whom thou seekest is not at present in our camp. Therefore I will hear what thou hast to say," said Cyrus.

"We are two Jews driven from Babylon who seek shelter from thee," began Heber.

The king demanded the causes of their leaving Babylon. As briefly as possible Heber narrated the incidents with which we are familiar. He began with the Jews' rebellion and ended with his liberation from prison.

"So the fools would not wait until spring as I ordered them," commented Cyrus, referring to the rebellion of the Jews.

"It was thought best to strike before Belshazzar was crowned," answered Heber.

"A fine time," said the king sarcastically. "With a city full of soldiers, they should have known better. I will no more depend upon their help."

Heber said nothing, waiting for the king to continue the conversation. The monarch sat silent and thoughtful for some moments. At length he raised his head and asked: "Where is this Sheshbazzar of whom thou spake?"

"I know not," replied Heber. "He escaped from prison and fled the city. My wife, Tirmar, left at about the same time and she was mistaken for him, dressed as she is in man's attire. Her description was given me and she it was whom I followed."

The king became thoughtful again. Heber and Tirmar stood quietly awaiting his next remark.

"We will find a place for thee here," he said presently. "Thy wife shall serve our queen and thou, Heber, shalt be attached to our own person. Thy knowledge of Babylon may be of service to us later. I would I knew the whereabouts of this Sheshbazzar. I might place him upon his father's throne." This last was said in an undertone as if to himself.

Gobryas was called and given instructions regarding the two Jews. Heber was at once installed as one of the king's personal attendants and Tirmar was introduced to Queen Cassandane. The royal dame received her graciously. Suitable clothing was furnished her and she entered upon her duties at once. In the days following she became the favorite and confidant of her royal mistress.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ARAB MERCHANT

Summer passed into autumn; autumn gave place to the short, mild winter; winter in turn gave place to spring, and still the earth seemed to have swallowed up Sheshbazzar. Heber as we know had never returned. Therefore the king's prison was minus two important prisoners. Not one word, not the slightest hint or clue had reached the ears of the king or rab mag concerning the man they sought. Nabonidos took great pleasure in reminding his chief adviser of the fate in store for him should the escaped prisoner not be found. Consequently Vulmaran was using every imaginable method of seeking news to find out the prince's whereabouts. A vast corps of spies was scouring the country, (at great expense to the rab mag), but not the least scrap of intelligence had they brought in. The king had never inquired about Heber. No doubt the monarch believed him duly executed.

Affairs during the past eleven months had run in comparatively smooth channels. There had been some uneasiness among the subject tribes to the south, but otherwise no political troubles assailed Nabonidos. The only discord was between king and priesthood, a trouble dating from Belshazzar's coronation day. The entire body of the priesthood down to the youngest acolyte supported Neboakhu, and so powerful was the class that Nabonidos dare not vent his anger upon the chief priest. Belshaz-

zar continued as an associate king, but reigned without the blessing of the gods.

The king's Hebrew subjects had given him no further trouble. The rebellion was never countenanced by their real leaders, nor did the better class of Jews engage in it. Josedek, his daughter, and Heber were the only participants of noble blood. The king evidently considered the Jews sufficiently punished and had not pursued them further. Many of those taken prisoners were subsequently released, and undoubtedly this clemency was good policy. Be that as it may, the idea of winning their own liberty had entirely died out and, aside from instructing his spies to keep close watch upon their actions, the king paid no more attention to them.

The general life in Babylon during this quiet period is unimportant. How fared the friends of Sheshbazzar in their endeavor to pave the way for his ascent to the throne? They had worked quietly but with fair success. Some thirty persons were directly connected with the plot while many more stood ready to take the prince's side when he should appear. Hints of the existence of a true king, who would one day lead them, had been freely circulated among the people and the soldiers. All this had been accomplished quietly without an inkling reaching the ears of either king or rab mag. Ulbar took good care that no subordinate of his should report anything he might learn concerning Sheshbazzar or his friends.

The priesthood could be counted upon to a man. Belibus had taken many of his troop into his confidence and he gave assurance that practically his entire command would support its former captain. Orma had freely talked of the matter with her father and Daniel but they both advised against rebellion. Nehum had reached the age when a man desires peace and Daniel could see the impending fate hanging over the city.

"Too late, too late," he would say whenever Orma mentioned the subject. "The power of the Almighty is about to be made manifest."

If Orma heeded the words of the aged prophet, her co-workers

did not. The visions of an aged Jew were meaningless to such fiery Babylonians as Belibus and the other men he had drawn into the circle. Only Nitocris heeded them and they gave her pain. She remembered the wonderful Daniel of old, the interpreter of the great king's dreams and she remembered how Daniel's interpretations came true. Even now she shuddered at the remembrance of a small enclosed garden which no man was allowed to enter. She remembered the greatest of Babylonian monarchs crawling about that garden upon all fours and eating grass as a beast of the field.

One wish was ever present with those engaged in the conspiracy to place Sheshbazzar upon the throne of his father; the wish that he was where they could communicate with him. Only one word had they received from him. Six months after his departure an Arab merchant sought out Orma and presented her with a silken shawl, "sent by the Arab Kadasman who had once known her." That was all and yet it was a clue. He was with the Arabs and his name was Kadasman.

With the coming of spring, the caravans began to arrive in the city to dispose of their wares. The friends of the absent prince watched them closely and cautiously questioned each merchant. One of his friends visited the market place each day, in the hope of securing some tidings of the prince. Unless something was soon learned, they must send for him. This daily task usually fell to Orma. The rank of the others might make such duty dangerous for them. One day, late in the month corresponding to our May, when Orma reached the market place she found a caravan in possession, their horses and camels in the background and their wares spread out upon rugs laid on the pavement.

She cautiously approached the group, ostensibly to purchase. She moved from one merchant to another, eagerly watching for an opportunity to question them. The last merchant in the line, an old man, was alone. As Orma leaned over to inspect his goods, she cautiously asked him if, in his travels about the desert, he had met with a young Arab named Kadasman.

"I have," he replied, "he is with us this trip. Wait a moment and I will call him."

He turned to enter a tent that stood some ten feet back from the row of merchants. Orma stood speechless. The hot blood came and went in her face. Could it be possible? Ah no. There must be a genuine Arab of that name. What could she say to him? How could she explain her asking for him? Before she had time to frame a sentence the old merchant returned. Behind him strode a tall young Arab. At sight of the waiting girl he sprang forward, and bending low he whispered, "Orma, my own."

It was he! She knew him instantly even through his disguise. It was the man she loved above all other men, the man for whom she would have given up all that life held dear.

"Come," he said, "I have finer silks in the tent."

She accompanied him as he entered the tent. There was no furniture within. Standing in the center of the confined space, they looked into each other's eyes a moment. Then he folded her to his breast and kissed her upon both blooming cheeks. She rebuked him not.

"My own," he whispered, "how has it gone with thee?"

"It has been well," she answered, "only Heber. Not one word have we ever had from him. I fear he has paid the penalty of his deeds. We mourn him as one dead."

"Poor Heber," said the prince, sadly. He made no attempt to dispute her belief. He too felt no doubt concerning Heber's fate. They were silent for some moments, thinking of the young man dear to both. Orma was the first to speak.

"Is it not dangerous for thee to return?" she asked.

"I have no fear of being recognized. Thou wouldst not have known me had I not made myself known."

"Ah sir, thou art mistaken. I knew thee the moment I saw thee," she said.

"Then I hope the eyes of mine enemies are not as sharp as thine," he said smiling.

"I fear for thee," she said sadly. "The eyes of hate are fully as sharp as those of love."

"I will be careful," he replied, "for the sake of those who love me and for the cause I represent."

"Are any expecting me?" he asked a moment later.

"Many are hoping for thy return," she answered.

"I fear it is too late. I fear my country is doomed. Only yesterday a traveler from the north informed me that Cyrus had crossed the Tigris with an army the largest ever seen. I fear he will carry all before him; that all will be lost and the great empire established by my grandfather will crumble into dust. Nabonidos underestimates the strength of the enemy and trusts his walls and ditches to defend him."

Strangely, Orma did not take this information as sadly as she ought. She, a Jew, could scarcely be expected to view the world with the eyes of the man beside her. In her dreams for the future the palace of Babylon had no part. She only dreamed of a cozy little cottage under Mount Moriah. Sheshbazzar was silent, thinking.

"I have a plan," he exclaimed presently.

Orma listened.

"I will go to the king and inform him of the approach of Cyrus. I doubt if word has yet reached him. Perhaps it will stir him to action."

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Orma. "Why expose thyself to such danger?"

"Danger!" he exclaimed. "There is no danger. The king will not know me in this guise. Mayhap I will have opportunity to see the queen."

Orma made no further objection and in a few moments they separated.

"I am coming to see thy father soon, my loved one," he said as they stood in the tent door.

She shook her head sadly, divining his meaning. She stood silent a moment, her eyes downcast. When she again raised her head, her eyes were swimming in tears.

"Do be careful of thyself for my sake," she murmured and was gone.

Late in the afternoon of the same day an Arab merchant presented himself at the palace entrance and asked for admission to the king's presence. He urged important business as his reason. After a long wait in the large entrance hall of the palace a minor officer of the royal household came and questioned him. The Arab was wary in his replies, but succeeded in convincing the man that he had important information to convey.

"Wait here until I can apprise the king of thine errand," said the officer grandly, silently motioning the Arab to a seat.

Kadasman seated himself as ordered. During the wait his mind dwelt upon his present position. He realized the temerity of it. Discovery meant certain death. Not again could that terrible chamber be foiled of its purpose. Once again in the power of Nabonidos or his crafty rab mag there would be no hope. No power on earth could save him. The fear of death did not impress itself upon him, for he was not thinking of death as it applied to himself individually, but rather as the ending of his line, the final triumph of the usurper. His personal feelings were merged in the far nobler thoughts of his house, his dynasty. Since knowing of his birth and lineage his only thought had been to reestablish the royal line of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar.

The officer soon returned with orders for the Arab to follow him at once. Through the familiar halls and corridors his feet had so often trod before, the fugitive followed his important conductor. Did the latter but know it, the humble Arab behind him was no stranger in this building; in days of yore he required no attendant to usher him into the king's presence.

With mingled feelings of curiosity and fear the Arab entered the apartment so familiar to him. The great library was more crowded than he had been used to seeing it. A hasty glance about the room and at its occupants revealed a change in affairs. The grand old nobles that he had been taught to revere, the men

who had witnessed Babylon's glories, were not present. Either they had become tired of the present regime and had withdrawn from the councils of the king, or else the king had leaned toward lesser minds and driven the old men away. Kadasman had little time for observation or speculation for he was conducted straight to the throne, the new councillors making room for him. The Arab looked straight into the faces of the two monarchs as they sat upon their twin thrones, but he saw no signs of recognition in their stolid countenances. He bowed stiffly and then stood waiting for the monarchs to open the conversation. Nabonidos motioned to his son to conduct the interview.

"Thou bringest information of importance?" asked the youth.

"Yea, O King, I bring tidings of vital importance to thy nation." He spoke in a low tone, intending his words for royal ears alone.

"We await thy further speech," commanded Belshazzar.

"Know then, O mighty King, the armies of the Medes and Persians have crossed the Tigris into thy territory and are marching southward."

His words brought consternation to Nabonidos. A trembling as of fear seized him. He looked at the Arab bewilderedly. The suddenness of the announcement unnerved him; the unexpected proximity of the enemy appalled him. He sat silent for some moments but at length, the first surprise passing away, he became more calm. He called up Vulmaran and several nobles. Kadasman at once recognized the latter as officers in the army, men who only a year ago had been in command of companies and regiments. Now they were generals. To his joy he noted Belibus among those called. The Arab was directed to repeat his information that these might hear.

A discussion followed. Not a plan had been formulated to resist the invaders. Save for the canals and the mammoth walls of the city, no defense existed; yet for fourteen years this attack had been regarded as among things inevitable. Now that the enemy was near at hand an army must be raised to resist him. All was confusion. The conversation revealed the lack of a

head. All these upstart generals were upon an equal footing. There was no commander-in-chief. Indeed Vulmaran mentioned this at once and suggested that some general be appointed to the supreme command.

"I will take command in person," declared Nabonidos.

"But the government," quickly interposed Vulmaran, realizing full well the value of Nabonidos as a general.

"Belshazzar is king. He shall govern until my return," answered the king.

At length after many words had been spoken but little of value said, the various generals received some sort of orders. One by one they left the room to undertake the fulfillment of the orders. These orders were to assemble all available forces at the city of Sippara. Already forty thousand men were there or in the outposts beyond Accad.

Meanwhile the informer stood with folded arms, motionless, his tall form erect, an interested but impassive listener. After the last of the generals had departed Nabonidos remarked to his son: "If only Nabomuran had not learned of his birth we could feel more secure. I would match his generalship against that of Cyrus any day."

Suddenly he noticed the Arab.

"Ha, fellow," he cried, "why lingerest thou here? Begone."

The Arab bowed silently and turned to depart, but at this instant Vulmaran interposed.

"Nay, O King, send him not thus away. He brought us news of great value and should be amply rewarded."

Nabonidos called the Arab back.

"What reward can we bestow upon thee for thy services?" he asked.

The Arab hesitated.

"I have a request to make but I fear thou wilt not grant it," he said.

"Speak, man, and it shall be thine if within our power to bestow," said the king.

"I request the privilege of serving under thee against thy foes.

At home, in the desert, I have been called a man of valor. Mayhap I can serve thee well."

"A noble request, Sir Arab," said the king. "Thy people are not wont to serve under the Babylonians. I grant most willingly that which thou askest. Thou shalt serve with me and be attached to my staff. A place of abode shall be found for thee in the palace until we are ready to advance against our foes."

The officer who had conducted Kadasman hither was now called and instructed to assign an apartment in the palace to the Arab. He bowed and left the room, followed by the latest addition to the Babylonian army.

CHAPTER XXIV

VULMARAN'S VISIT

Vulmaran, rab mag of Babylon, was not a happy man these days. His fortune was rapidly dwindling due to the enormous inroads made in it by his countless hosts of secret agents and bribed officials. Already his beautiful and princely residence was heavily encumbered and the holder of the mortgage was a man he feared. By far his greatest anxiety, however, was concerning Sheshbazzar. Barely a month remained in which to find the fugitive and there seemed to be no hope of finding him. This man, at whose instance more than one unfortunate had tasted the horrors of the drowning chamber, had now the prospect of experiencing them himself.

Upon the evening of the day celebrated in these pages by the return of Babylon's prince, Vulmaran was pacing up and down a magnificent apartment of his lordly mansion. His hands were clasped behind his back, his head was bowed, his whole attitude was one of the deepest dejection. His brow was overcast and his face pale. His lips moved as though he was talking to himself.

While still in this mood the draperies that screened the doorway were pushed aside and Iddin, the gay son of the rab mag, entered. An indefinable change had taken place in the young man. His face wore a more noble expression, his whole bearing was changed. Some revolution had taken place in the young man's character.

His father did not at first notice his son's entrance, so absorbed was he in his own gloomy thoughts.

"Why father," exclaimed the youth, "what is the cause of thine anxiety?"

"Ah, Iddin," replied Vulmaran sadly, "never aspire to public life. It has a golden glitter but beneath all is disappointment and misery. Look at me. Did not I more than anyone else win the throne for Nabonidos? Was not mine the hand that slew the crazy boy king? What have I received for my services? An honorary position carrying no income, save such public funds as I can turn my way. Now the king I made would cause my death simply because this Sheshbazzar escaped. Would to Bel I had taken his side rather than that of Nabonidos."

"Ah father, thou knowest I advised thee to support the prince. From the first, before I knew Nabomuran was the Lost Prince, I intended to cast my lot with him. Thou knowest well the weakness and inability of Nabonidos. Why wilt thou serve him longer?"

"My son, what can I do? How can I serve a man that cannot be found?"

"Mayhap if thou assured his friends of thy interest in his cause and promised thy support, they would send for him. No doubt those in his councils know where he is."

"What thou suggestest is impossible, Iddin. The only way for me to have mine own life is to place that man in prison."

"That I am sure cannot be done. Thou hast scoured the world for him and not even a suspicion has resulted. Therefore, unless he returns and overthrows the present government within a few weeks thou art doomed."

"Unless——." The rab mag hesitated.

"Unless what?" inquired his son.

"Unless the Persians end the empire before the time expires."

"That would be a calamity for the whole nation, father. We must not save ourselves at the expense of our country."

"Country indeed," replied the rab mag, turning angrily upon his son. "Is not my life of more value to thee than any government?"

"To me, yes, but not to thousands of my countrymen."

"'Tis of myself alone I think," persisted Vulmaran. "My life is more to me than the whole world."

"Ah, father, the selfish man must always lose. We cannot think of ourselves alone. This world was not created for one man but for the many."

"Nevertheless in this case the one man counts for more than the many. I tell thee, Iddin, before I die in yonder chamber I will open our gates to the Persian. Then Nabonidos will see who it is he would put to death."

"Then father, thou art no parent of mine." I would willingly give my life to save thine but I will not be the son of a traitor."

"Iddin," cried his father, more sad than angry. "I little thought to hear such words from a son of mine. Tell me what wondrous change has come over thee. Thy whole life is different. Thy expenditures have fallen away to nothing. What is it, Iddin, art thou to marry?"

"The change thou seest, father, means simply this. Mine eyes are opened to behold the true God, the One Almighty Ruler."

"Nonsense," sneered the rab mag, "thou art crazy. What meanest thou? Hast thou turned Jew?"

"I believe in the same God they worship."

"Then truly all things are coming to an end. When a Babylonian forsakes his women, his wine and his gods truly something is sure to happen."

Iddin waited to hear no more but turned and left the room.

He had long been aware of his father's character but it was a blow to him to find that he contemplated treachery.

After his son's departure Vulmaran sat down upon a couch in the corner of the room. He was desperate. Something must be done, but his usually active mind refused to assist him at this time. He had been in tight corners before but some deep-laid scheme, perhaps a murder, had saved him. Now all seemed lost. As he had told Iddin but one loophole was left him. Cyrus alone could save him.

His thoughts were again interrupted. The second intruder was a Greek, one of the rab mag's most trusted spies.

"Well," said Vulmaran rather testily, "what bringeth thee here at such an hour?"

"I have news of the utmost importance," replied the spy.

"Give it me quickly," exclaimed Vulmaran.

"I am in no haste," replied the Greek coolly.

"What meanest thou?"

"I mean this. Thou hast offered five talents to the man who brings thee news of Sheshbazzar. I have news. He is in the city at this moment. When the five talents are in my possession I will reveal his present name and whereabouts."

"The gold shall be thine," cried Vulmaran. "Now tell me where I can find this man."

"When I hold the gold in my hands I will give thee the information and not until."

"Perhaps," he added musingly, "the friends of the prince can offer me more than five to keep still."

"Thou shalt have ten," cried the rab mag.

The Greek turned to depart.

"I will be here in the morning. If thou hast the ten talents ready the information shall be thine."

After so speaking he vanished through the doorway, leaving Vulmaran alone with his troubles. The rab mag sank back upon the couch, faint at heart. Ten talents! Where could he obtain such a sum? The last time the house of Egibi had made a loan to the king the rab mag had demanded a part in the

profits. Refused, he had striven to rupture the negotiations, thereby gaining for an enemy the only man who could now help him. Egibi was already a creditor of the bankrupt officer and could at any moment cause his ruin. All paths seemed closed to him. For the sum of ten talents he could learn the whereabouts of Sheshbazzar, but where could he find ten talents?

There was one last resort and this desperate step must be taken. Therefore he called for his chariot and when it came, he stepped in. He mumbled a direction to his driver and they set out for the destination mentioned.

It was past midnight, but all hours were the same to the desperate man. After a drive of nearly three-quarters of an hour the chariot drew up before the house of Neboakhu.

Vulmaran alighted and hurried to the entrance. He pounded vociferously upon the door with his fists, making din sufficient to wake the golden god on the temple's summit above him. At length a sleepy servant appeared to inquire the cause of the uproar.

"I must see the chief priest at once," said Vulmaran.

"My master dislikes being called at night, but if thou wilt give me thy name I will see if he will come down," answered the servant.

"Tell him his brother Vulmaran wishes to see him on urgent business."

The servant ushered him into the reception room where a dim light was burning. To the waiting man it seemed as if the servant was absent an eternity, but at length he returned. He brought word that Neboakhu would soon be down. Some moments later the old priest entered the room. He had merely thrown a long robe over his night attire.

"To what cause can I attribute the honor of this visit?" he asked haughtily.

"Remembering we are sons of the same father I sought thee out to ask of thee a favor. I am in a desperate plight and must have ten talents before morning. Therefore I am come to beg them from thee. Thy triumph is complete. I remember the

last words thou spakest unto me when we parted never more to be known as brothers. If after thy words I come to thee for assistance thou canst see the urgency of my case." The rab mag spoke humbly, almost cravenly.

"Thou speakest right. This *is* a moment of triumph for me. For thirty years have I awaited such a moment, and now it is come. Now I shall have my revenge."

The priest seated himself opposite his brother, and looking him straight in the eye, spoke as follows:—

"Let me see," he said, "I am sixty years of age; thou art fifty-five. Then it is just thirty years since the night Camada placed her hand in mine and promised to become my wife. Ah Vulmaran, I was a happy man. The foremost beauty in Babylon had confessed her love for me, had consented to share the life of the humble priest. The world contained no greater joy for me than that. I was content. Mine ambition was for the time deadened. All I dreamed of was life with my love. For six months I lived in perfect happiness, little dreaming of the blow in store for me.

"One evening I drove out to her father's residence in my gay chariot. I intended that night to ask the old general for his blessing upon our union. All the way my thoughts were upon my loved one and the days of happiness in store for us. I hardly felt myself a man that night. I was a god, dwelling in clouds of light. All was radiant about me. That evening was the supreme moment of my career. When I reached the house, instead of entering it I passed around it to the garden, knowing my love would be among the flowers, herself the fairest flower of all. Ah, what a sight met my gaze as I suddenly came upon her. There she stood, radiant in her beauty, but—clasped in the arms of another! I sprang forward, maddened at the sight. Murder was in my heart. I grasped the interloper by the shoulder and whirled him around. Another moment and my dagger would have drunk of his heart's blood, but in that moment I recognized the man. He was my father's son. I turned to Camada and bitterly upbraided her, telling

her to make her choice. She did so and bitterly did she regret her decision. Against the villain, half my brother, but thanks be to Bel, only half, I swore eternal enmity. Now after thirty years I see him come cringing, fawning, begging for the gold my labors have earned me.

"Tonight, Vulmaran, I have my revenge. Thou shalt have the gold freely and without usury. By so accommodating thee I win a more complete revenge than I would by refusing thee."

The old priest was right. To accept so great a gift from the brother he had wronged was more galling to the proud rab mag than would have been the most indignant refusal. Neboakhu left the room but returned in a short time. He handed Vulmaran a clay tablet saying: "Present this to Bena Egibi and receive from him that thou desirest."

The rab mag arose. He was humbled and crestfallen. His brother stood calmly before him, a smile of contempt upon his thin lips. Twice Vulmaran tried to speak but the words came not. At last he found the words he desired.

"Neboakhu I wronged thee it is true, but believe me, until the night thou discovered me embracing the woman who afterwards became my wife, I did not know she had promised herself to thee. For this present favor I thank thee. It may be thy last opportunity. Ruin and death stare me in the face. Egibi can take my house away from me at any time he chooses and Nabonidos will take my life unless the miraculous happens within the month."

"Thine intelligence gives me pain," said the priest. "With thy permission I will straighten thee out with Egibi. As regards Nabonidos I am powerless to help thee. My life too would be in danger but for his fear of the priesthood. Ah Vulmaran, thy ways in life have paid thee ill. Poor as I am, I yet am happier than thou with all thy scheming."

"Brother, for thy kindness accept my thanks," said Vulmaran.

"Nay, not kindness; revenge," replied the priest.

A moment later the rab mag departed. As he passed out the

door he muttered: "‘Poor as I am.’ He is either a liar or a fool and, as he is my father’s son, I think the former. Had I the revenues of the temple under my control I would make myself the richest man in Babylon. I believe him rich and if this prince he so worships can be gotten rid of, the money will one day be mine."

CHAPTER XXV

ENEMY OR FRIEND

The following morning Kadasman arose early and made his way to the large dining-hall at the rear of the palace where all those connected with the king's household (and they were legion) were fed. There in the company of door-tenders, messengers, guards, charioteers, eunuchs and other servants of the vast establishment, he partook of his morning meal. As he ate he could but think of other meals eaten in that building but under vastly different circumstances. Still, he felt no unhappiness over the change. Humble as was his present station he was content with it for the time being. His sun would one day rise and then he could look back with amusement upon the days of his seclusion.

His position in the royal household was as yet undefined. He had no duties and no superior to tell him what he should do and whither he should go. Therefore his first act after finishing breakfast was to seek the king and have his position defined. As soon as he deemed it likely he could find Nabonidos, he presented himself at the door of the reception room. The time was well chosen. Both kings were in their places ready to receive all who sought them. Kadasman was the first caller this morning, and he was at once ushered into the presence of the two sovereigns.

As he walked across the large apartment he fixed his gaze upon Belshazzar and studied the lad well. A few months

had wrought a great change in the appearance of the once handsome youth. Every sign of unbridled license was indelibly printed upon his countenance. Truly he had become his father's son. The heart of the fugitive sank within him as he thought of his beloved country with its destinies intrusted to such hands as these. Fair Babylon was surely in desperate straits. He must have appeared distraught for Nabonidos called him to order sharply.

"Hast thou never seen a king before that thou must stare our son out of countenance?" he asked.

Kadasman recovered his bearing instantly.

"Yea, O King," he answered, "I saw both thee and thy son in the great parade at coronation time."

The remark pleased the king. The coronation parade was a pleasant memory to the monarch and those brought in daily contact with him sought to mention it whenever opportunity afforded. The present reference put him in better humor.

"What errand hast thou this morning?" he asked, not unkindly.

"I came, noble sir, to receive thy commands concerning my duties. I do not wish to remain in idleness at such a time when danger threatens."

"I have no commands to give this morning. There is no need of haste. Our walls are strong," replied the king.

"I fear there will be work enough for all ere long. Canst thou find no duty I can perform, no message I can carry? My horse is both swift and sure," persisted the Arab.

"I tell thee, sir, I have no orders to give thee. In good time duties shall be found for thee. For the present eat, drink and be merry. Enjoy life while thou hast opportunity. When the time comes for us to take the field all festivities will cease—we cannot carry our wine skins into battle. When I need thee I will send thee word. So now begone; no doubt others are waiting."

Kadasman bowed deferentially and withdrew. As he passed through the anteroom he noted with surprise that none awaited

admittance to the presence of the kings. Yet this was a nation preparing for war with the foremost military power on earth. Truly O Babylon, thy friends were thy worst enemies!

As he walked leisurely toward the palace entrance, Vulmaran hurried past him. The rab mag paid no heed to the Arab. The latter smiled after the encounter was over, smiled to think of his successful deception. Ah, Sheshbazzar, if only thou had some good fairy to render thee invisible and convey thee to yonder room thou wouldst hear the rab mag cry to the king: "Send a force to take yonder Arab. He is Sheshbazzar, the man for whom we have searched these eleven months." The gold talents of Neboakhu had purchased the Greek's information!

Meanwhile the unconscious Arab, secure in his disguise, was walking leisurely through the palace hall. His step was slow as is always the step of one who has no goal in view. He suddenly conceived the idea of visiting his foster-father, whom he had not seen since Belshazzar's coronation day. He would have preferred visiting a certain house on the Borsipian road but he felt his duty to the old priest to be first.

After leaving the palace he strolled leisurely toward the market place. He wished to bid farewell to his desert friends and obtain Saru who was still quartered with the horses of the caravan. The simple Arabs heard with wonder the tale of their former comrade. All looked upon him as a favored being and congratulated him accordingly. It was with deep and genuine regret that he bade adieu to these simple but kindly friends who had given him shelter when he most needed it. He had grown to love them and under some circumstances would have enjoyed spending his days among them.

After bidding these kind friends farewell, probably forever, he mounted Saru and rode away toward the temple. Here was a mistake. Far better would it have been to take the poorest mount in the caravan, for what judge of horseflesh, having once seen Saru, could ever forget him?

Shortly after turning into the temple street Kadasman met

Iddin, the rab mag's son. The young noble hailed the Arab at once and asked to ride at his side for a short distance; a request that was speedily granted.

"A fine horse thou hast there, my friend," said Iddin.

"He is," replied the Arab. "This line of horses has been bred in our tribe for generations."

"Hast thou ever sold any here?"

"Many. We sell a few horses here every spring," was the reply.

"I thought as much. I once knew a man who owned a horse that resembled thine so closely that he must have been one of the same breed. Mayhap thou sold it to him. His name was Nabomuran. He was an officer in our army. Dost thou remember selling him a horse?"

"I have never sold a horse to a man of that name, but this is my first trip here with the caravan. Mayhap my brothers sold it to him."

"He has another name. Thou mayest recall him by that," pursued Iddin.

"What was his other name?"

"Kadasman," replied the youth.

Before he could speak another word, he felt himself dragged from his horse's back. The strong right hand of the pseudo-Arab held him as in a vise. Iddin's horse, frightened at the sudden attack, turned and ran wildly back toward the market place.

"Thou art rough, my friend, and hasty too. I meant thee no harm. I only intended to surprise thee," said Iddin.

"Thou didst surprise me genuinely," said the prince grimly.

"I alone know thee to be Sheshbazzar and I was not sure until I saw thee upon that horse," continued Iddin, who was still standing upon the ground, his clothing firmly gripped by the man beside him. Saru stood impatiently, not relishing the sudden stop.

This scene had taken place in that part of the temple street bordering upon the great reservoir. At this hour of the day

the street was deserted. It was too late for the populace, the working classes, to be abroad and too early for the chariots to begin their promenade, for this beautiful street was the Babylonian speedway.

"Come, sir," begged Iddin, "we have been friends from childhood. See yonder clump of trees upon the water's edge? Let us go thither that I may talk with thee."

The prince hesitated a moment. He scanned Iddin's face critically and searchingly, but his gaze had no effect upon the youth. A certain feeling of confidence in him arose in the prince's mind. He dismounted and silently followed the young man to the retreat mentioned. He tethered Saru to one of the trees, leaving line sufficient to permit his browsing upon the luxuriant herbage that grew upon the bank of the vast artificial lake. The two young men seated themselves upon the shelving bank in the shade of the group of palms. The morning was magnificent and yielding to their inclinations, they stretched themselves upon the greensward.

"How camest thou to discover my identity?" asked the prince.

"Well," answered Iddin, "it was accidental. I was passing through the market place at about this time yesterday. Actuated by curiosity I stopped to watch the Arab merchants as they displayed their wares to the crowd. While I was thus watching them I was attracted by the actions of a Hebrew woman who passed from one to another of the merchants in a peculiar manner. I recognized her as the one my father's agents were watching, for rumor made her the love of Prince Sheshbazzar. As I followed her with my eyes she reached the last merchant in the row and, bending over, seemed to speak to him in a low tone. He turned and entered a tent. A moment later he returned accompanied by a young man whose dress and features betokened an Arab but whose stature and figure could belong to but one man. Still I was not certain. His disguise was well nigh perfect. Had he not conversed with that one Jewish woman it is doubtful if I would have suspected him. However when I saw that Arab mounted upon

Nabomuran's horse all doubts vanished and I knew that Prince Sheshbazzar had returned to claim his throne."

"It is useless for me to deny being that person," said the prince. "Such falsehood would not deceive thee. Now thou hast penetrated my secret, Iddin, what art thou contemplating? Shalt thou put thy father's spies upon my track?"

"Nay, sir," replied Iddin soberly, "I shall offer thee my poor services."

"What meanest thou?" cried the exile, half rising.

"Just this. I am disgusted with the present state of affairs and will gladly join thee in whatever efforts thou mayest make to gain thy throne."

Sheshbazzar placed one hand solemnly upon his companion's arm and looked him straight in the eyes for a moment.

"Iddin, art thou in earnest in this matter? Do not raise false hopes within my breast and then hand me over to the king's guard," he said in a nervous agitated manner.

"Prince," replied the young man firmly, "I will subscribe to any oath thou requirest of me. I am sincere. My mind is settled and I am determined to follow thee to the end, be that end what it may."

"Throughout my life," he continued, "I have been called a gay and even a profligate youth. My most intimate friends have secretly despised me for the utter uselessness of my life. My very name has been a synonym for profligacy. 'As gay as Iddin' was a remark heard all too often. Those days are past. Mine eyes have been opened and from henceforth I shall live for a purpose. I shall make thee that purpose. I consider thee my lawful king and as such I shall serve thee faithfully. If when thou art firmly seated upon thy throne thou findest me worthy and appointest me to an office under thy government I shall be thankful but I ask for no promise. Only I must be free to worship mine own God."

"Thine own God!"

"Yea, Prince. Thou hast heard of a God called Jehovah?"

Him I worship, in secret 'tis true, but nevertheless I worship Him. He is the one God. All others are false."

"Iddin, what has caused this great change in thy life?" inquired the astonished listener, scarcely believing it could be his old acquaintance who was speaking.

"A Hebrew maiden has shown me the error of my ways," responded the former rake solemnly.

Sheshbazzar laughed for the first time in months. He respected his companion's confidences but the young man's solemn and tragic manner of speaking appealed to his sense of the ludicrous.

"So thy heart has been won by a Jewish maiden?" said the prince after a moment of silence.

"Yes, I have found love among that strange people. Rumor has it that thou hast given thine own proud heart to a Jewess," answered Iddin.

"Yes, Iddin, I have found the maiden of my choice among the Hebrews."

"Hast thou also learned to serve Jehovah?" asked Iddin.

"Nay, I still serve the gods that have never failed me. I acknowledge this Jehovah to be a wonderful God but I see no reason for changing my religion."

After a brief silence the conversation turned upon Sheshbazzar's chances of success. Iddin began it, attempting to draw out his companion, but the prince, remembering whose son he was, was cautious. Without question Vulmaran was his worst enemy. However, he allowed Iddin to do the planning, he being an interested listener.

"In the first place," said Iddin, "how many are already enlisted in thy cause?"

"That I do not know myself. I have had no time since my return to confer with my friends," replied the prince cautiously.

Iddin was not abashed at the lack of confidence displayed by the prince, but rattled on as though he were already the chief confidant of the pretender.

"Of course we can count on Neboakhu," he continued. "He

is known by all men to be on thy side. Then there is Belibus and nearly all of his men."

"How camest thou by such information?" demanded the prince sternly. He was genuinely afraid for his friends if such information was public property.

"Oh," answered the youth glibly, "I have talked with them. I have been interested in thy cause for many months and I have often sought the advice of Belibus. He himself told me that nearly all the members of the Winged Lions are in thy secret and stand ready to strike for thee."

"That is pleasant news," said the prince. He was perplexed and bewildered. Evidently the rattlehead was deep in the councils of the plotters, but still the fact remained of his being Vulmaran's son.

"I doubt not," continued Iddin, "that all the priesthood are on thy side. They are certainly supporting Neboakhu, else the king would have had his life long ago. The masses too have an inkling of a coming conflict. They have heard thy name and are waiting for the king who will arise and strike off the burdens that oppress them."

"With all these on our side we should win," mused the prince, as one speaking to himself.

"Win!" cried Iddin, "we cannot lose. All that is necessary is for thee to mature thy plans and give the word for all who favor thee to flock to thy standard. We would soon have an army to defy all Babylon."

"And all Persia?" queried the prince.

Iddin's face fell.

"Ah, sir," said he, "there is the only cloud upon our horizon. We must win before they can get within striking distance. With such a soldier as thee for king we could meet them fearlessly."

"They have never yet met with defeat," said the prince sadly.

"Neither had Assyria, but thy great-grandfather broke her power."

"That was an entirely different matter. Assyria was a nation weakened by luxury and excess, while these Persians are stern and fierce warriors, hardy and rugged, eating only the plainest food and able to stand all sorts of hardship. In the coming conflict we resemble Assyria more than does Persia."

"Nevertheless, Prince Sheshbazzar, I believe thy genius can defeat these terrible barbarians. If thou only claimed Jehovah as thy god we might invoke His aid."

"Mine own gods must desert me first. They have helped me when I most needed them and they will help me win my rights."

Iddin shook his head in so sorrowful a manner that it made the man beside him smile again, a smile of pity for his companion's superstition.

"Nay Sheshbazzar, without Jehovah thou canst not win though all the world be on thy side," said Iddin solemnly.

"I pray my father shall not recognize thee," he said a moment later. "Dost thou know, were it not for the sentence hanging over his head he would gladly be on thy side?"

"What sentence?"

"The king has decreed that unless thou art captured within one year from the time of thy escape my father shall be executed in thy place."

"Iddin," said the prince soberly, "there is just one way to save thy father's life."

"How?" asked the youth.

"We must win before that time expires."

"Thou art right," cried Iddin eagerly, "and thy speech removes a load from my mind. We must lay our plans at once and hurry them forward to a successful completion, for the remaining time is short."

There was a clatter of hoofs upon the pavement. A hurried shout of command was given and before either of the young men could gain his feet they were surrounded by a band of soldiers. One glance at the swarthy faces told Sheshbazzar

these were men who had never known him nor served under him. No favors could be expected of them.

An officer, also unknown, stepped forward and laying a hand upon the shoulder of Sheshbazzar, said. "Kadasman, I am ordered to take thee in the king's name."

Not a movement was made in Iddin's direction. The prisoner saw this at once and turning fiercely upon his friend of a moment before, cried passionately:

"False viper, son of a false father. I ought to have known better than to trust thee. With thy smooth tongue hast thou beguiled me until these should arrive. I will avenge this yet, Iddin. From this moment thou art cursed."

Iddin stood pale and confused beneath this denunciation. He made no answer but suddenly a look of determination came into his face. Sheshbazzar was bound and blindfolded and placed upon a horse's back. After he was securely bound to his steed the company started off in a northerly direction. Iddin threw himself upon Saru's back and galloped off ahead of them.

CHAPTER XXVI

ALAS FOR JUDAH!

Orma was seated upon the couch in her favorite bower, busily engaged with a piece of needlework. As she worked her brain was active; indeed her thoughts outdistanced her fingers, for occasionally her needle would stop and her hands would lie idly in her lap. Finally she laid down the needlework, and throwing her arms behind her head, leaned back against the bower's supports and gave her whole attention to the thoughts that had so interfered with her work.

As old age lives in the past so youth dwells in the future. It was not thoughts of the past that triumphed over the needlework. Orma was thinking of the present and the future, especially as they concerned the life of herself and the man who held

so important a place in her heart and mind. That her thoughts were troubled ones was manifest by the cloud of sorrow resting upon her usually placid brow. What girl of any age or era could have pleasant thoughts, supposing her lover to be standing upon the brink of the abyss of death?

This was the morning following the events of the previous chapter and Ulbar had just brought her news of the capture of the prince. The information possessed by the dwarf was meager and unsatisfactory. Not a word, not a clue had come from the prince since his capture and the chief spy's sources of information were without number. One in their secret, the doortender of the king's anteroom, gave word of the disclosure made by Vulmaran and a captain of horse being sent for in haste. He further stated that the prisoner had not been taken before the king. This latter was strange news. Ulbar argued that as the prince had once been condemned, it was unnecessary for Nabonidos to see him again.

Orma had as yet seen none of the prince's friends. Trusted though she was with their every secret and act, she was yet but a passive conspirator. Her circumstances prevented her giving any direct assistance. Her sex and the social position of her race made it impossible, much as, on the other hand, the high rank of Nitocris and Halista was a hindrance to them. In fact the priests were the only adherents of Sheshbazzar who had any great liberty of action. Belibus, though with them heart and soul and ready at any time to lay down his life if by that sacrifice his former commander's prospects of winning his throne would be enhanced, occupied a position of responsibility. His time was so fully occupied with his duties that he had little opportunity to assist his fellow conspirators, save with advice. The real leader therefore was Neboakhu. The old priest with a few trusted subordinates was working day and night for the cause of his foster-son. So far had they progressed in gathering friends together that they were hoping to bring about a crisis at once. Now all plans were overthrown by the sharp eyes of a Greek spy.

While Orma sat thus meditating upon these conditions, her father entered and seated himself beside her. He at once perceived that she was in trouble, and his first words were of inquiry concerning its cause. In a few words she gave him all the information she possessed of the events of the preceding day. The old man listened attentively, sorrowful in his daughter's sorrow, but having no real concern for Prince Sheshbazzar's fate. His daughter's love for an idolater was daily growing more distasteful to the old man. Although confident that she would never marry against his wishes, it yet troubled him to see the love she made no attempt to conceal.

"God is our Ruler," said the old man solemnly as she finished speaking.

"I know He is, but O father, this last sorrow seems more than I can bear. First Heber meets death at the hands of yonder king and now the prince, the noblest and best of men, follows in the same path. O father, our God is a just God. He must punish the crimes of this wicked king."

"Give not up hope so soon, daughter. He has once escaped from their hands." Thus spake Nehum in an attempt to comfort her, but it came not from the heart for he had but little hope for the brave prince. She shook her head and replied:

"Nay, father, there is little ground for hope. His previous escape will but make his enemies the more vigilant to see that he does not elude them this time."

There was silence for a moment. Then Orma looked up lovingly into her father's face. She laid one hand affectionately upon his knee, as she asked: "Father, is it wrong for me to pray for his deliverance?"

"Nay, daughter. Pray earnestly for it and at the same time pray for his soul; pray that he may see the light and, forsaking his idols of stone, turn unto our God, the Great Ruler, the All Powerful."

"Father?" she asked after another brief period of silence, "dost thou bear ill will toward the prince?"

"Nay, daughter. I regret that thy love is for an idolater

but were he a worshiper of Jehovah I would gladly call him 'son'."

"If only he would worship as we do," she said sadly.

For the moment they forgot the prince's plight and spoke as though he were free.

"All is possible with God," said Nehum reverently.

"Only this day," he continued, "Joshua informed me that a young noble, the son of a high officer of state, had made earnest profession of faith in our God. Joshua expects to receive him into our worship soon. Thou seest then, daughter, there is hope of his eyes being opened should he escape from his present difficulty."

"Joshua then has returned?"

"Ay, he has been in the city for several days."

"What tidings does he bring?"

"Our people everywhere are zealous in worshipping the true God. The way seems open for our deliverance. Out of the present crisis may come happiness for our people."

"Father!" cried the girl suddenly, as one possessed of a new idea.

"What it is, my dear?"

"Suppose the deliverance of our people should come through the prince."

"It is possible, my dear, possible. God works through many channels."

"Joshua brings us other news of the greatest importance," continued Nehum.

Orma said nothing but waited for him to go on.

"He brings a clue to the identity of the prince of Judah."

An animated light came into her eyes. "Has he been found?" she cried.

"Nay, daughter, but Joshua secured information that may lead to the discovery of our prince."

"Father," she said, "explain to me how it happens Judah is without a prince. Thou hast told me once but I do not quite understand it."

“Gladly will I do so, daughter, and then I will tell thee of Joshua’s discovery. As thou rememberest, the last real king of Judah was Jehoiachin who reigned but three months and ten days. He was taken prisoner by Nebuchadnezzar and brought captive to Babylon. For six and thirty years he lay in the prison of the king. After the old king’s death his son Evil-Merodach released Jehoiachin and elevated him to friendship with himself. He died shortly before the good king was murdered. Now Jehoiachin died childless thus leaving no direct heir. His next of kin was Shealtiel, the son of Neri. He was directly descended from King David but through his son Nathan and not through King Solomon. Shealtiel died soon after Jehoiachin thereby leaving the succession again open. It has always been believed by the leaders among our people that Shealtiel left no heirs, in which case either his brother Pedaiah or Pedaiah’s son would be the prince of Judah.

“For several years therefore (ever since the death of Shealtiel) our leaders have been searching for Pedaiah but without avail. Here rested our case then at the time of Joshua’s start for the south. That journey was undertaken partly to carry on the search for our hereditary leader.

“Now listen, daughter. Among our people living in the cities of the south Joshua found the wife of Shealtiel and from her lips heard a wonderful tale. After the succession of Evil-Merodach Shealtiel and his wife resided in the royal palace with their kinsman Jehoiachin and while there the wife gave birth to a son who was named Zerubbabel.

“The birth of the prince nearly cost her her life and for months she lay upon her bed, a helpless invalid, the child being cared for by a servant. Before she recovered her strength the good king was murdered and those he had befriended were turned out of the palace. Among those turned out was Shealtiel and his wife. In the confusion the girl had vanished and no trace of the child was found. Soon after this Shealtiel died and his wife sought a home among her kindred who had settled to the south of Babylon. There for twenty-three years has she

remained, hoping and praying that her son might be restored to her. That is all we know, my dear, but upon this tale hangs the hope of Judah. If that child be living, he is the hereditary prince of Judah."

"Father," said the girl the moment he finished speaking, "I have a thought concerning our prince. Thou rememberest the account of Prince Sheshbazzar's rescue at the time of his father's murder. A slave girl offered her child that the little prince of Babylon might live. No mother, however humble her station, would thus sacrifice her own babe. Ah no! That slave girl gave up the prince of Judah to save the prince of Babylon."

"Alas," cried the old man in tones of the deepest anguish. "I see it all as thou sayest. Alas for Judah!"

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

When Kadasman or Sheshbazzar found himself again a prisoner in the hands of his enemies a dull, sickening sense of complete failure came over him, crushing his proud spirit. From the moment he had been informed of his royal birth everything had been against him. He now felt all his struggles to have been made in vain. He found himself wishing either that Nitocris had not revealed his rights unto him or else that Ulbar had allowed the drowning chamber to do its work. Notwithstanding the horror of the death the agony could have lasted but a few moments, and then oblivion forever; no more trouble; no more enemies.

This feeling of despair at length gave way to an intense feeling of hatred. If only he could escape and avenge himself upon his enemies he would afterwards submit to torture and death. He cursed himself for allowing Iddin's words to beguile him.

Meanwhile here he was tied to a horse's back, bound and blindfolded, being led he knew not whither, except that it would end in imprisonment and death. As the moments sped by he wondered at the length of time required to convey him to the royal prison. His astonishment increased as they journeyed onward, apparently with no intention of stopping. He at length judged some new prison to have been provided for him beyond the border of the city. Long since they must have passed the palace and by this time should be well out in the suburbs.

At length the shouting of soldiers to their horses and the splashing of water about him showed them to be fording a canal or river. The prisoner's astonishment increased as each hoof-beat placed them farther and farther from the city. Still more did he wonder when an hour later they forded another stream. He was all at sea as to his whereabouts.

Suddenly he heard the clatter of hoofs and a moment later he heard the ring and clash of arms all about him. A thrill of joy ran through him, awakening every dormant sense. Were his friends seeking to rescue him? Before he could imagine an answer to his own question he felt a hand upon his horse's bridle and in a moment his animal was being dragged away from the mêlée. He saddened instantly, thinking his captors were making sure of him at all events. From the sounds of battle dying away and the speed at which he was going, he judged a detail of the band were hurrying him to a place of safety, leaving their comrades to fight it out with his friends.

He heard a horse running close beside him and a moment later a voice whispered in his ear: "Fear not, Sheshbazzar. Thou art in the hands of friends and not enemies."

The voice was the voice of Iddin, the rab mag's son! Notwithstanding the feelings of hate and contempt he had lately held for the youth, a faint ray of hope shot through his soul. Had his friends really rescued him? His judgment answered him nay. Iddin was a traitor and was but playing with his victim. If his friends had really rescued him, why did they not unbind and unhoodwink him? Still, argue as he would, Iddin's

words gave him hope. Above all was the realization that some sort of conflict had taken place.

The cavalcade continued their journey not lessening their speed in the least degree. The prisoner pondered why, if Iddin's words were false, was it necessary for his captors to keep up such a terrific pace. If they were king's troops they had no fear of pursuit. His hope in Iddin's words grew stronger as he reasoned thus. If, however, he was in the hands of friends, who might those friends be? Time would tell. In the meantime he resolved to sit quietly and accept whatever fate had in store for him. He noticed that, save for an occasional low word to their horses, not even a whisper was heard throughout the band.

At length the speed was slackened and they soon came to a halt. He judged from the bustle and shouting about him that they were making ready to camp for the night. Soon he was lifted from the saddle and placed, tired and stiff, upon the ground. A meal was served him and then all became still. He judged it to be late and turning upon his right side, was soon asleep.

He was awakened early the following morning and made to partake of a hasty breakfast. Then he was lifted upon his steed and the company resumed their journey. A few moments after starting they had settled into the same steady gallop pursued the preceding day. Once they slackened their speed and the prisoner knew from the sounds that they had been joined by other troops. Not a word was spoken, yet he was sure the numbers of those about him had been increased. The prisoner judged they had been riding for six or seven hours when at last the cavalcade halted. He felt his bonds loosened. A hoarse voice (he felt sure it was disguised) commanded him to dismount. He obeyed quickly and quietly. If in the hands of friends he had nothing to fear; if in the power of enemies resistance would be futile.

He was led, still blindfolded but entirely unbound, up a flight of steps into a building, down a corridor, up another

flight of steps, down another corridor and into a room. When inside he felt some one fumbling at his hoodwink. Another second and the bandage was removed, restoring his sight to him. He stood still a moment blinking in the bright sunlight. In that moment his unseen conductor escaped through the door and the prince could hear the bolts shot into place. He was still a prisoner then, but in whose hands remained a mystery.

The room in which he found himself bore little resemblance to a prison, even though he was confined therein. It was large and light and contained all the furniture necessary to its occupant's comfort. As the prince glanced about it he compared it to the other cell he had occupied and his hope in Iddin's good faith grew stronger. Vulmaran would never have confined him in such a pleasant place. If however, he was in the hands of friends, why was it necessary to still keep him in confinement?

As to the building containing his cell a glance out of the wide window showed it to be the country residence of some person of note and consequence. From the character of the land he felt sure he had been carried toward the north. His window looked out upon a large courtyard, now completely filled with soldiers. He noted them carefully but all appeared unfamiliar to his eye. Evidently Nabonidos had drawn heavily upon the subject tribes, for none of the troops here represented were Babylonians. The opposite side of the courtyard was enclosed only by a low stone wall, thus affording him a view of the country beyond.

Whatever was the nature of that country it was now impossible to see, for as far as the eye could reach the landscape was covered with white tents, stretching away row after row until they passed over the brow of a slight elevation. How far down the opposite slope they ran he could not tell.

The size of the camp both astonished and pleased the prisoner. He was surprised that Nabonidos had been able to gather together so vast an army in such a short time. It bordered on the miraculous. What surprised him also was the great discipline and order manifest throughout the camp. Long

ago he had urged upon the king the necessity of better training for the Babylonian soldiery and he was now pleased to see the fruition of his suggestions.

The remainder of the day he spent at the window gazing upon the wonderful scene before him. All was activity. He could see mounted men dashing about through the camp, while occasionally a general officer, followed by his retinue, ambled up the hillside. The scene in the courtyard was particularly one of bustle. Messengers came galloping in, hurriedly dismounting, and disappearing within the building. His heart sank within him as slowly it dawned upon him that the villa containing his cell was the general headquarters of the camp. Soon, if not already, Nabonidos would be under the same roof with him. Again his mistrust of Iddin returned. Still if he was a prisoner of Nabonidos that monarch had completely changed his methods of treating offenders.

Toward night the door of his chamber opened and a negro entered bearing a tray with a most appetizing repast thereon. Having been without food and drink since early morning he was in a condition to do ample justice to the meal provided. While he ate the servant stood silently behind him and when he finished, carried the tray away. The prisoner heard him as he carefully barred the door behind him. He had no more visitors that day, and as soon as the room became dark, he stretched himself upon his couch.

Weary from his long ride he soon fell into a deep sleep and did not rouse until the bright rays of the morning sun, falling across his face, awakened him. He arose at once and hurriedly put on such of his attire as he had removed before lying down. To his astonishment he found that his coarse Arab dress had been removed and in its place he found garments of the richest materials and dyes. Once arrayed in them he felt himself again a Babylonian noble. Standing upon a low stool beside his couch was a beautiful helmet of polished bronze, studded with pure gold, and leaning against the wall near at hand was a long bright sword. Had the prince possessed a mirror he

would have noted with surprise that the stain had been removed from his face, and his beard had been trimmed.

Shortly after he had completely attired himself in the fine vestments furnished by his generous captor, the door opened and the servant again appeared. Again the prisoner did full justice to the meal provided. From the viands composing his dainty breakfast he derived the first hint as to his whereabouts, for the food was not Babylonian in its character. As before the servant gathered up the remains of the meal and left as soon as the prince had finished eating. Again the prisoner heard the door barred. Surely beneath the glove of velvet could be felt the hand of iron.

The day wore away slowly. Soldier though he was and closely as he studied the camp outside, the occupation proved monotonous. He paced up and down the apartment; he lay down; he did all he could to while away the time. If his first day of confinement passed thus slowly what would those to follow be? Noon came and with it came the negro with a light lunch. The servant departed as before, barring the door behind him. The prisoner gave himself up to another weary time of waiting and watching.

He was not doomed longer to endure his solitary confinement, however, for shortly after the negro's departure he heard other footsteps approaching. They stopped before his door and he heard the bar removed. The door swung open and a man entered, closing the door behind him. Sheshbazzar gazed upon him in perplexity. It seemed as if those handsome, mobile features were known to him, but for the moment he could not remember where he had seen them. In an instant, however, he remembered the man and advanced joyously to meet him.

"Rastagus!" he cried, grasping both his hands.

"Nabomuran!" exclaimed the other.

"Call me no longer Nabomuran," said the prisoner. "I am that Sheshbazzar of whom we spoke upon the desert."

"Prince of Babylon, I salute thee!" exclaimed the Mede.

"I too must change my name," he said a moment later. "Hereafter know me as Cyrus, King of Anshan."

The words were spoken quietly but with a simple dignity in perfect keeping with the lofty position of the man. Sheshbazzar recoiled a step from sheer astonishment. His old companion of the desert, the conqueror of Asia? It seemed incredible; his mind scarcely comprehended the simple announcement. Yet the man before him was every inch a king, and clad in a manner which, while of studied simplicity, was in keeping with his station.

Cyrus smiled at the effect his announcement had upon his guest. He waited a moment for the first surprise to die away and then addressed the prince.

"Prince Sheshbazzar," he began, "the events of the past two days must have been perplexing unto thee. Thou wert taken prisoner by the troops of Nabonidos but awake to find thyself a guest of Cyrus. The explanation is simple. For some reason I cannot fathom the troops of King Nabonidos carried thee out of the city and headed north toward Sippara. The only motive I can conceive for this course was the fear of thy friends. I am told thou once escaped from the king's hands and therefore he probably feared thy friends would again rescue thee. However that may be, to the course pursued by thy captors I am indebted for the pleasure of entertaining thee.

"A body of my cavalry was reconnoitering in the vicinity of Babylon when they encountered a solitary horseman, riding fiercely northward. They stopped him and questioned him. He informed them a young man of high birth had been taken prisoner and would be conveyed along that road. Recognizing them as belonging to my army he requested them to rescue the prisoner and conduct him to my camp. He pledged himself that I would approve of such action. The soldiers accordingly selected a strategic position and then awaited the coming of thy captors. At length they appeared and my men charged them. During the struggle thou wert rescued and, without

waiting for the encounter to end, a half dozen of the men rode away with thee.

"As their act was unauthorized by me they continued to treat thee as a prisoner and this treatment was continued up to the moment I entered this room. The young man who brought word of thy capture sought me out and informed me of all concerning thee. I heard with pleasure of thy presence and gave orders concerning thy care. I have waited thus long before seeking thy presence in order to give thee time to recover from the weariness caused by thy adventures.

"Now, prince, listen to me. Upon the memorable night I spent as thy guest on the desert I related to thee a tale which at the time I little imagined bore such reference to thyself. Thou rememberest the tale? I told of meeting an old Chaldean in his cave and of the vow I made at that time; that I would assist the young Prince of Babylon in gaining his throne. That prince has been found in thy person and I stand here this day, backed by an army whose numbers I do not know myself, prepared to redeem the vow made by me more than twenty years ago."

He ceased speaking and stood as if waiting for an answer.

"I do not understand thee," said Sheshbazzar.

"In other words, my friend, I stand ready to place thee upon thy father's throne," replied Cyrus.

The full sense of the great conqueror's generosity did not at first appear to the young man. Yet here was a king, confident of capturing a great empire and adding it to his own domain, offering to give away that empire as he would bestow a silver piece upon his servant. As it dawned upon the prince's mind he was astonished at the offer, an offer absolutely without parallel in the history of the world. Such an unselfish use of power had never before been known. What a difference the acceptance of that offer might have made in the world's history!

Sheshbazzar was silent for several moments. He was thinking as never man thought before. He reviewed all the points

involved in the conqueror's generous offer. He even looked far into the future, striving to read his duty. Truly what a temptation was placed before this young man! Would he have the strength to obey the commands of his conscience? When, at last he raised his head the battle had been fought, the victory won.

"King Cyrus," he said, "such generosity was never before heard of. Unborn generations shall learn of this and hold thy name in reverence for it. For myself, my poor tongue is unable to express my appreciation of thine offer, but, King Cyrus, I cannot accept it.

"While I oppose my king and seek to wrest from him the throne that is not his right, I am yet a Babylonian. Dame Babylon is my mistress and I would be unworthy of her love were I to accept the means thou offerest me of winning her. Most noble and mighty king, greatly as I prize thy friendship I must refuse thine offer even at the cost of that friendship."

Sheshbazzar spoke these words solemnly, fully expecting them to turn a powerful friend into a yet more powerful enemy. His astonishment was great, therefore, when Cyrus grasped both his hands warmly.

"Sheshbazzar," he cried, his face alight with enthusiasm, "thou art a man after mine own heart. Because of my vow it was my duty to offer thee my help, but I honor thee far more for refusing that offer than I would for accepting it. Prince, believe me sincere when I say, did I feel myself free to consult mine own inclinations, I would gladly turn my back upon Babylon and leave thee free to win thy throne. This present campaign is not for mere personal glory or territorial aggrandizement. Were those my objects before tomorrow's sun was half way on its journey toward the zenith every tent on yonder plain would disappear and every man would be faced toward Persia. However, that cannot be. I feel myself an instrument in Almighty hands, a tool of a Divine workman. I am destined to carry Divine punishment to yonder city, to carry liberty to an imprisoned people.

"Therefore I cannot relinquish my undertaking, but one opportunity I can give thee. Go thou to Babylon, raise an army and come out to do me battle. We need not meet personally. Upon the issue of that battle we will abide. If thou canst but check my advance I shall take it as an omen from the gods and withdraw, leaving thee to thy kingdom. I shall fight, however, as I have never fought before and nothing short of a miracle can prevent my reaching the gates of Babylon. Once I reach those gates thy kingdom is doomed."

"I accept thine offer or challenge, whichever it may be termed," said the prince. "I will go directly to Babylon, declare myself before the people, trusting to the gods to give me success."

"Tomorrow then," said Cyrus, "I will turn over to thee all the Babylonian prisoners I have taken thus far, together with such horses and accoutrements as thou wilt need for them. With thy departure at their head I shall consider my vow fulfilled and from that time forward, until the battle decides who rules Babylon, we are enemies. Whichever wins, from that time onward to eternity we are friends. I half hope the victory will be thine but I shall do all I can to defeat thee."

Both men smiled. There was something so unusual, so unreal about this compact. These two men, now the best of friends, were coolly planning to become the worst of enemies and then, when one of them was beaten, become friends again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON THE MARCH

The following morning a rather motley company was gathered in the courtyard of King Cyrus's headquarters. It consisted of all the Babylonian soldiers the conqueror had picked up during his rapid march across the plains of Chaldea. They had composed the numerous small and detached garrisons that

were strung along the northern and western frontiers. All had surrendered to Cyrus after a mere show of resistance. In all they numbered nearly six hundred men and all were soldiers trained to their vocation and inured to hardships. Many a successful rebellion has started with fewer numbers.

King Cyrus had shown no niggardly spirit in mounting and arming the band. He gave as good as he had, and he had the best the world of his day afforded. The soldiers as yet had no idea of their destination. Exchanges of prisoners were a courtesy of war unknown at that time and once a man became a prisoner to the enemy he became his slave. It is more than probable the majority of the men supposed they had been given their freedom that they might serve under the banner of Cyrus, and such was the level of Babylonian patriotism at the time that they would have obeyed implicitly if such had been their orders.

When all was ready for the start Sheshbazzar came out of the villa and critically looked them over. He passed up and down the ranks, examining the horses, the arms, the mules, the servants. His inspection convinced him yet more of the conqueror's disinterestedness and generosity. He turned to mount the horse a servant was holding for him. A smile of glad surprise lit up his features as he noticed the steed to be his beloved Saru. Without questioning the manner of his being there he vaulted to his back. Turning in his saddle he ordered his company to fall in. Slowly they wheeled their horses into columns of fours. The Persian soldiers standing about laughed at their clumsiness.

"Forward," cried Sheshbazzar and the cavalcade was instantly in motion.

King Cyrus failed to show himself at this time. Earlier in the morning he had visited his guest and engaged him in a brief conversation, after which they parted not to meet again until the day of battle. Out through the archway the prince led his command and once outside he headed southwest toward the Sippara road.

Sheshbazzar as he rode across the grassy plains, strove to map out some plan, some course of action. Here he was at the head of six hundred men, not enough to make a satisfying meal for the soldiers of Nabonidos should they turn cannibals, and he realized he could do little with the force now at his command, but where could he dispose of them until others could be enlisted. There were many topics of thought all demanding instant attention. His status with the men, they following him blindly they knew not whither, must be defined, but he doubted the wisdom of taking them into his confidence at once. None knew as well as he how the army of Babylon teemed with spies. He doubted not that Cyrus knew the details of every regiment in the service of Nabonidos.

He realized, however, that this was a chance he must accept sooner or later, as he could not expect loyalty from men who knew not for whom or what they served. At present not a man among them was known to his commander by name. He felt himself in a delicate position. He longed for a confidant, an adviser. He resolved to enlist the services of Belibus at the first opportunity, but he felt the need of an adviser at the present moment.

So intent was he upon these thoughts he paid little heed to what was going on about him. He glanced up occasionally to see that he was leading his men in the right direction but not once did he look behind him. He did not therefore observe the rapid approach of two galloping horsemen who were straining every nerve to catch up with him. Unconsciously the prince had allowed Saru to travel at a rapid pace and his followers were obliged to hurry their beasts to keep up with him. At length the two horsemen caught up with the band and in another moment were abreast of its commander.

Sheshbazzar turned quickly at sight of two men, one riding on either side of him. He looked from one to the other in astonishment although he had suspected one of them to be with Cyrus. The newcomers were Iddin, son of Vulmaran, and

Heber, son of Nehum. After a brief word with the first named, the prince turned affectionately to his former servant.

"Heber," he said, "I supposed thee dead. Thrice welcome then is this meeting. Tell me how it happens thou art alive and at liberty."

Heber related the incidents of his life from the moment he had angrily parted with his master up to the present. He flushed deeply as he told of his compact with Vulmaran, but the prince smilingly reassured him.

"I have permission from King Cyrus to join thee in thine undertaking and here I am master, ready to retrieve the past with my life if needs be," he said in closing.

"Ah Heber," was the reply, "we little know in what paths our passions will lead us. Thou fell a victim to thine ambition, as many a man has done before; as indeed I may before this present venture is completed."

"Dost thou then accept my services?" asked the young Jew eagerly.

"Gladly, Heber."

"And mine?" asked Iddin.

"And thine also, Iddin," he replied.

Turning to the rab mag's son he held out his hand.

"Iddin, canst thou forgive and forget the hasty words I spake unto thee when I found myself a prisoner? Remembering whose son thou wast, I suspected thee of having betrayed me into the hands of mine enemies. I have since bitterly repented the words."

"Thy words stung me at the time, Prince, but I have since forgotten them. I can see how thou wouldst suspect me. Had I been in thy place no doubt I would have said more than thou didst," replied Iddin, smiling.

Sheshbazzar now possessed companions with whom he could discuss his plans. True, neither was very valuable as an adviser but even such rattle-brains as Iddin sometimes advance original ideas. Moreover both men were devoted to him, notwithstanding that both had previously opposed him, Heber in

active rebellion and Iddin by assisting his intriguing father. The prince had no hesitation about placing his affairs before his companions. He explained to them the problems confronting him. Both advanced suggestions and strange to state, their suggestions coincided. The plan outlined by Heber and concurred in by Iddin while simple, impressed its salient points upon the prince. It embraced first, the selection of an easily found but at the same time secluded spot for a camp where Sheshbazzar and his men could remain while Heber and Iddin went on to Babylon. They would at once place themselves in touch with the prince's friends and begin active recruiting. Once the force had acquired sufficient strength they would march on the city and wait for a dark night when the priests or some other friendly party would open the gates to them.

"Wilt thou accept recruits from among my people?" asked Heber.

The prince remained in thoughtful silence for some moments. It was not the first time his mind had dwelt upon this question. Heber waited quietly for the answer he expected.

"No, Heber," said the prince finally. "Thou knowest the regard I have for thy people but in the present case I would prefer not to enlist their services. I fear the acceptance of Jews might deter some whom I desire from joining me."

The words were spoken kindly and Heber had sufficient sense to prevent his taking offense at them. He could appreciate his former master's reasons for the decision.

The plan suggested for the conduct of their campaign was again taken up and considered in all its phases. They felt the necessity of at once finding such a spot as they had in mind for a camping place. The prince decided it ought to be at least a day's journey from Babylon; in other words about midway between the city and the present location of the Persian forces. To find a place at once, secure from observation and yet so easily found as to enable their recruits to reach it without difficulty, seemed an impossibility. Such a spot would be an anomaly, but ere nightfall they found one.

Heber's plan had one defect in the eyes of Sheshbazzar. It necessitated taking his present troops into his confidence at once, a step he dreaded. but there seemed to be no alternative. As Iddin truly said, it must be done sooner or later and perhaps it would be best to learn at once those they could depend upon. Still it was a step at variance with the prince's better wisdom, realizing as he did how one traitor can overbalance a thousand friends. It being necessary to take such a step, it was decided the men should be called together and told all, trusting to the almost universal hatred of Nabonidos to insure their taking the prince's part.

The day's march was uneventful. Aside from a brief stop for lunch upon the banks of a small stream, they kept steadily on without interruption. The only variety to the monotony of their steady progress was the constant search for the desired camping place. Occasionally Heber or Iddin, or perhaps both, would gallop ahead of the rest to search for such a spot. Late in the afternoon Heber left them for at least the fourth or fifth time and was soon lost to sight. So long was he gone that at last Sheshbazzar halted his troops, fearing that the young man had left the route they were traversing and had been passed by. As the prince was on the point of sending out parties to search for him, he was seen coming, galloping across a large field and waving his arm in glee.

"I have found the exact spot we desire," he cried when within hearing.

Iddin was left in command of the troops while Heber led the prince to the spot he had found. The commander was fully satisfied with the site and they returned to the road where the main body awaited them. The command to move forward was given and, preceded by Heber, they marched across a field of wheat and another of barley. After crossing the fields they forded an irrigating canal and then plunged through a wooded marsh. Once through this last they were within the camping place discovered by Heber. It was a field of waving grass containing upwards of an hundred acres. It was completely hid-

den by the surrounding belt of woods and it was moreover capable of being stoutly defended in case of attack.

Once inside the men dismounted and preparations for the night were begun. The generosity of King Cyrus had supplied them with a few tents but by no means enough to shelter the entire command. Many of the troopers therefore constructed rude booths of tree boughs interwoven with smaller branches. While these preparations were going forward Heber and Iddin set out on foot to completely explore the vicinity. Their chief object was the discovery of some distinguishing landmark that might serve to guide recruits to the camp. In half an hour they returned and reported the finding of a ruined tomb upon the side of the camp toward Babylon. The tomb was situated beside the highway (the Sippara road) from which the camp was easy of access to those aware of its existence. The ruined tomb was a guidepost that none could mistake.

After the evening meal had been prepared and disposed of, the prince had the men assemble in the center of the camp that he might address them.

"Soldiers of Babylon," he began, "a noble enemy has granted thee thy liberty that thou might take part in an enterprise which, while fraught with danger, is yet one of honor."

He then briefly sketched to them the events connected with the murder of King Evil-Merodach and the rescue of his child, ending with these words: "Fellow soldiers, this babe is still alive and is now grown to manhood's state. He it is who is the lawful king of Babylon. He is about to claim his throne and to thee is extended the invitation to assist him in that attempt. Ye all knew Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard. Recognize in him at once the speaker and Sheshbazzar thy lawful king."

A loud outburst followed his speech. The prince hastened to secure silence for fear the noise would be audible to any who might be passing along the road.

"Men," he said when quiet was restored, "can I depend upon

thee? Wilt thou follow me to the gates of Babylon? Wilt thou place me upon the throne of my father?"

Cries of "We will"; "Count on us"; "Long live Sheshbazzar, our king," answered him.

"On the morrow we will organize into companies and choose officers. If there are any here who have commanded companies they will remain and speak with me. All others may now seek their quarters."

Three men remained in accordance with his invitation, while the remainder sought their various tents and booths. The three gave their names as Belmurda, Nebogurza and Shemakin. The first two were erect, soldierly looking fellows and commanded their leader's good will at once. The third was a short and powerfully built man with an ugly countenance, but he gave a straight account of himself. All three had commanded companies in the royal army and had likewise commanded garrisons upon the northern frontier. They had surrendered to Cyrus after putting up as stout a resistance as their numbers allowed.

Lots were drawn to see which of these men should be in command of the camp during the night. Chance decided upon Shemakin and the others were sent to their tents. The prince instructed Shemakin to select twenty men as sentries, he to take command of them and remain awake to see that all went well.

These arrangements completed, Sheshbazzar sought his tent, his two friends having preceded him there.

CHAPTER XXIX

VOICES IN THE WOODS

The night was nearly spent and the first light of dawn was stealing through the trees when Sheshbazzar suddenly awoke. He was usually a sound sleeper and this sudden awakening startled him. He sat up and listened, sure that some noise

had aroused him. All was still, only the slight rustle of the leaves on the trees surrounding the camp disturbing the quiet of the night. He was unconvinced however; he was sure there was some cause for his sudden awakening. After listening for several moments he decided to make a tour of the camp.

He arose noiselessly and wrapped a long cloak about him. At the tent door he stopped to listen again. All was quiet, save for the rustling of the wind through the trees and the tramp of the nearest sentry, who was stationed but a few feet from the prince's tent. Sheshbazzar hurried past him; the man recognizing him said nothing. Upon reaching the outskirts of the camp the prince again stopped to listen, but heard nothing. He was still sure that some disturbance had awakened him and continued his walk, stopping only to question the next sentry he met.

"Hast thou heard any disturbance?" he asked.

"Not a sound, sir," replied the man.

He continued his tour of inspection until he reached his starting point. He had neither seen nor heard anything to indicate a cause for his awakening, but he was still unconvinced. Determined to be fully satisfied that nothing was wrong before he again retired to his tent, he began a second tour. This time he chose a route completely within the belt of woods. Inadvertently as he progressed his steps led him deeper and deeper into the woods. He could still catch glimpses of the camp through the openings between the trees and he realized he was straying farther away, but he made no move to change his course. An irresistible attraction was drawing him onward.

Suddenly he stopped and listened. Then he took several cautious steps forward and again stopped to listen. He dropped upon his knees and crept slowly forward, after the manner of an Arab searching in the sand for the footprints of his quarry. For nearly thirty feet he thus crept along, ending his uncomfortable journey at a small grassy knoll beside a clump of small trees whose branches were so interwoven as to make of

the clump a natural screen. Lying prone upon his stomach the commander listened attentively to two voices engaged in conversation upon the opposite side of the leafy barrier.

"Tell me I say what object thou hast in view," said a voice.

"That is my own affair," replied the other.

Desirous of beholding the speakers, Sheshbazzar pushed aside the boughs in front of him so quietly that the speakers heard no sound to warn them of his presence. Wriggling himself as far into the clump as he could penetrate, he at last contrived to open a way large enough for him to peer through. Upon the opposite side of the barrier was a slight elevation, carpeted with a velvety rug of grass and surrounded by trees and shrubs. Upon the summit of this elevation two men sat side by side. Notwithstanding the dim light the observer was able to recognize them clearly. They were Iddin and Shemakin. A feeling of distrust for the former again found lodgment in the prince's mind despite the devotion he had thus far shown. The prince decided to remain in his present position and hear what was said by this ill assorted pair.

"Tell me plainly," said the first voice, which he recognized as Iddin's, "what line art thou to follow while here?"

"I tell thee, sir," replied the other, "that whatever I do or do not do, not one man shall hear from my lips of my intentions."

"Be careful, Shemakin. Remember how much of thy past is known to me."

"Threaten me not," exclaimed the other. "Whatever I may have been concerned with in the past, others higher in rank than I have been more guilty. When I go down others go with me."

"I threatened thee not," said Iddin.

"It seemed like a threat," answered Shemakin.

"Nay, I meant it not so, but I insist on knowing what part thou wilt take in this present undertaking. Shalt thou fight for yonder pretender or shalt thou take the part of another?"

"That sir, no man shall know."

"I will know, Shemakin, ere we leave this spot. Unfold to me whatever plan thou mayest have. Mayhap we can work together. Remember, though I am in the prince's confidence, yet I am still the rab mag's son."

The man seemed mollified for when he spoke again it was in a less sullen tone.

"Thou knowest sir," he said, "I did not choose this company of mine own will. The king must have heard of my relations with thy father else he had not sent me so far from Babylon. I had scarcely reached my post when I was captured by the Persians. I welcomed this chance of gaining my freedom. Thus I am here and if I see it to my advantage to remain I shall be a true follower of the prince. If on the other hand thy noble father would make it worth my trouble, how easily I could slip out of camp some night and let him know of the prince's whereabouts. Methinks Vulmaran would be glad to get such news."

"Such a step might be easy but thinkest thou my father could reward thee sufficiently?"

"He has always paid well before."

"True, but let me tell thee, Vulmaran has neither the money nor the power he once had."

"Then let me know what I can get for following this prince. Thy father has always been good to those who served his purposes and I will not change horses without gaining thereby."

"Not a promise wilt thou get from the prince. I sometimes think I will get little for mine own allegiance."

"Art thou then a true follower of this man?" inquired Shemakin, surprised.

"I really do not know myself," replied Iddin, "were I not my father's son I could follow him to death, such is the magic of his cause, but I oftentimes feel myself the most contemptible of traitors to thus support the man whose escape from prison will undoubtedly cause my father's death. Whatever my father's faults, and I have disapproved of many of his actions as he well knows, he is still my father and has been to me the

kindest parent boy ever had. Ah, Shemakin, people little know the private life of public men. Execrated as they may be for their political deeds, at home they are often the best of men. However, much as a man owes his allegiance to his father, his country must come first and I believe from the bottom of my heart that unless the present dynasty is overthrown, Babylon is doomed. When therefore I joined myself to this man it was with the hope that he would triumph and with him on the throne we could face the world."

The old saying that eavesdroppers ne'er hear good of themselves was certainly discredited in the present case. Sheshbazzar swore never to distrust Iddin again after hearing these words, but in another moment his doubts became stronger than ever before.

"However, Shemakin," continued Iddin, "a man who betrays his own father is detestable and I am sorely tempted sometimes to be the means of capturing this prince, thereby saving my father's life. One word only would be needed. Merely mention the location of this camp and an army would be sent against it. The king would honor the man by whom the information came, for I have heard say that Nabonidos sleeps not of nights for fear of Sheshbazzar."

"Ah sir," said the other eagerly, "were I but in thy place I would not allow another day to pass without giving that information. This prince is good and noble, and I would like well enough to see him king. Still one's self comes first and to advance myself I would sacrifice him. Say thou the word and I will carry a message from thee to the king and I will share in thy advancement."

"Wait; we will see," answered Iddin.

There was a crash of breaking branches and Sheshbazzar stood facing his two subordinates.

"Ay, we will see," he cried. "Who will betray me in that manner? The first who moves dies on the instant."

He placed his hand upon his sword (which he had put on

before leaving his tent) and faced them resolutely. Both men cowered before him.

"Iddin," he cried turning to the young man, "I have suspected thee from the first, but this exceeds my worst expectations. Hadst thou never pretended friendship for me and the cause I represent, I would honor thee for seeking to save thy father by sacrificing me; but to do so in the treacherous manner thou hast mentioned should be beneath even *thy* father's son."

"Sir!" cried Iddin, springing to his feet in sudden anger, "I am unarmed and cannot resent this insult as a man should, and even were I armed I am no match for thee but had I a sword one of us would die here and now. Suspect me indeed! What right or cause hast thou to suspect me? Wherein have I been treacherous to thee? Thinkest thou if I had wished to betray thee I would have ridden to secure aid to rescue thee from thy captors? How much easier would it have been for me to have left thee in their hands? Why should I wait until thou hadst six hundred men to fight for thee? Ah no, if I had planned to betray thee thou wouldst at this moment be lying in thy dungeon."

Angry though he was Sheshbazzar could but see the logic in Iddin's reasoning for certainly there could be no object in obtaining the prince's rescue and then betraying him. He stood silent a moment regarding the rab mag's son. His anger relented but still the words "we will see" lingered in his mind.

"Forgive me Iddin for being so hasty," he said after a moment, "but look at the circumstances of this night. I was awakened by I knew not what, though now I imagine it was by thy leaving the tent, and arose to see if aught was wrong in my camp. Accidently I stumble upon two of my officers talking together in the woods and I hear words of treason spoken. I hear a plan suggested and he whom I have trusted says 'we will see' to it. Who would not suspect the man who thus agreed to a scheme of betrayal?"

"We may talk freely now," said Iddin quietly but tensely. "Shemakin has gone."

Sure enough, during the angry talk of these two men, intended by nature to be friends, the snake had glided away through the grass unseen.

"Now sir," continued Iddin, "thou hast this morning done more injury to thy cause than thy worst enemy could do. This man Shemakin I recognized as one of my father's most trusted tools and I set myself the task of watching him. It was my intention to take Heber into my confidence and we two would have taken turns watching him by day and night. I followed him out here this morning and, as thou has no doubt heard, attempted to draw him out. It was to keep him in my power that I acquiesced in a plan to betray thee. Now thou hast given him his opportunity. While we were upbraiding one another he has gone and I doubt not will go directly to my father."

"We must capture him. We will return to camp at once and order out the men in pursuit," said the prince.

"Yea, we will try, but I fear me he will not be caught. He is the most slippery villain I know of, so much so that my father actually feared him."

"Then Iddin, we must be prepared to meet whatever force can be sent against us," said the prince.

"Yea, and believe me, it will be no small force. Rather than have thee escape him Nabonidos will send his whole army."

"We shall prepare then to meet the whole army," said the prince quietly.

"If I am defeated," he added, "I must blame myself. Let us now return to camp and see what can be done toward catching this fellow. Come, we will go, and Iddin," he turned to the young man and held out his hand, "let us be friends."

"Friends!" cried Iddin, "Yea, till death itself parts us. Oh, suspect me not. I swear by all I hold dear I am truly thy follower. Welcome the day when an opportunity comes for me to prove my devotion."

Ah Iddin, thy chance is coming!

CHAPTER XXX

PRIEST AND BANKER

The rebellion of Sheshbazzar had now reached a point from which there could be no withdrawing. The prince was in camp at the head of six hundred well-armed men, preparing for a contest with the forces of Babylon. His six hundred, however, even after receiving the training he would give them during the next few days, were but a handful compared with the hosts Nabonidos could send against him. It was therefore imperative to multiply his force many times over and that at once. Accordingly the plan agreed upon was arranged for without delay. Immediately after the morning meal the three leaders engaged in a conference to which Belmurda and Nebogurza were afterward admitted. The departure of Shemakin and the probability of his giving information concerning them made haste necessary. Sheshbazzar, from his perfect knowledge of the king's habits, argued that it would be at least ten days before troops would be sent against him.

"I must disagree with thine opinion," said Iddin, "my father will urge the king to prompt action. I would place the date for an encounter not more than five days distant."

The brow of the prince darkened. He was sad and gloomy this morning. The future seemed forbidding. He beheld clearly the almost insurmountable difficulties ahead. It seemed already as if his cause was lost. For fear of disheartening his associates, however, he quickly conquered all appearance of despair and entered into the discussion with the air of a man confident of success. As a result of the conference it was decided that Iddin and Heber should leave at once for Babylon to begin their recruiting. On the way they were to make diligent search for Shemakin and if captured it was deemed best for them to bring him back to camp.

Shortly before ten o'clock the two recruiting officers bade

farewell to their leader and associates and turned their horses toward Babylon.

"In three days thou wilt see yonder road covered with bodies of men marching to join thee," cried Iddin gaily.

"If Shemakin does not bring an army down upon us first," said the prince.

"Never fear. We will have him back before night," answered Iddin.

After saying a last farewell Heber and Iddin rode out through the narrow passage the soldiers had chopped through the woods. Although many small bands had scoured the surrounding woods and fields since daybreak no sign of the fugitive had been discovered. All had returned without the least clue and it now devolved upon the two horsemen to overtake him. They went fully armed, knowing he would not be easily taken. It was deemed likely he would head straight for the city rather than skulk in the vicinity of the camp. Their surmise correct, they were confident of finding him, as a short distance south of the camp the monotonous flatness of the lower Mesopotamian plain began. The belt of woods surrounding Sheshbazzar's camp was the last bit of forest of any pretensions to be met with in journeying toward Babylon from the north.

Once upon the broad highway they urged their horses into as fast a gait as was consistent with the distance to be traversed. They were between forty and fifty miles from the city and they were determined upon reaching their destination before night-fall. Therefore if the search for Shemakin delayed them ever so little they must push forward at top speed in order to reach the city before the gates were closed. For two hours they galloped steadily on. The nature of the country traversed by them was such that they made little search for the missing man. On either side of the great road lay broad, far-stretching, flat plains affording no hiding place for the fugitive.

Toward noon they halted upon the bank of an irrigating canal and ate the simple lunch they had brought with them. As soon as the last mouthful had been eaten they remounted

and plunged through the canal on their journey. The horses they rode were strong solid beasts, too heavy for great speed but capable of great exertion and their riders pushed them to the limit of their endurance.

Ten miles from their lunching place they paused at the first dwelling they had thus far encountered, to inquire if a man of Shemakin's description had passed that way. The owner of the farm informed them such a man had stopped there, procured his dinner and purchased the farmer's colt, paying such a price for the beast that the old man chuckled as he told of it. The two men looked at each other in dismay.

"How long since he left?" Heber found the breath to ask.

"Two hours," was the reply.

"Is thy colt fast?"

"Fast," cried the farmer, "the king himself has no horse to catch him."

After thanking the old man for his information they walked back to where their horses were browsing beside the road. They mounted immediately and again pushed forward at top speed, but theirs was a listless pursuit. Shemakin, mounted upon a fast colt with two hours start of them, would reach Babylon in safety and once he was within the city walls they could do him no harm.

Five miles farther on they met a column of soldiers, numbering fully a thousand spearmen and half as many bowmen. Their commander was known to Iddin, who at once questioned him. Yes, they had seen Shemakin a long way back. He should be nearly to the city by this time. Where were the troops going? To Sippara, whither troops were now hurrying. Forty thousand were already there and from now on the great highway would be filled with marching columns. Nabonidos was moving at last!

"Thou didst not ask him to join us," said Heber, when they were again in motion.

"No, Heber, it would have been useless. Besides every man

that reaches Sippara is one less who can be sent against the prince."

"If all the troops go forward, we can enter the city without opposition," mused the Jew.

"Ah, Heber," said Iddin, "I am in this cause for life and death but I fear we cannot succeed. If the Persians had only waited one more year! However God knows best."

The Jew turned quickly at his companion's last sentence and would have spoken had not Iddin forestalled him.

"Be not surprised, Heber. I worship thy God," he said and then relapsed into a moody silence which Heber had the courtesy not to interrupt.

Late in the afternoon their tired horses walked across the drawbridge and through the great gates into the Golden City. Shemakin had preceded them by more than the two hours he had originally led them. Their first care when within the city was to seek out an abiding place. Neither young man thought it best to visit his own home. The same refuge suggested itself to both, the priesthood. Under the sheltering wing of the temple they felt they would be safe. Accordingly they turned their horses' heads toward the temple. By this decision they spared themselves the danger of passing through the city. The temple and the city of the priests lay to the north of the Shebil Canal. The entire tract between the canal and the inner wall was the property of the temple and the crops raised thereon went to the support of the priesthood.

A half hour's ride brought them to the residence of Neboakhu. The old priest himself came to meet them, welcoming them cordially and bidding them enter. When informed of the object of their errand and of their desire to make his home their headquarters he immediately acquiesced. Leaving their jaded beasts to the care of the servants they followed the old man into the dwelling.

"How goes it with the young prince?" he asked tenderly.

Iddin gave him all the information he possessed.

"He is at last under arms and prepared to strike? May the gods grant him success," said the old man solemnly.

"And we are here to enlist men," continued Iddin.

"Methinks the men will be plenty. There is a great spirit of dissatisfaction underlying the minds of all men. Thou wilt obtain thy recruits but great caution must be exercised. Enlist the regular soldiery if possible. They could start ostensibly for Sippara and when near the prince's camp, leave the road and join our forces. It will not be necessary to take the common soldiers into thy confidence. Enlist the officers and the men will follow them."

"That is our plan," said Iddin.

He then told the priest of Shemakin. The news was received with consternation.

"Should he prove traitor all is lost," he said. "The king will attack before we can add to the forces under the prince's command. This man must be found and his loyalty purchased."

"Ay," replied Iddin, "gold will make him our best friend, but where is the gold? With that at our disposal we could buy the king's whole army."

"And the king himself," added the priest laughing. "As for the gold, it shall be forthcoming. Get thou the men and I will find the funds to pay them."

They passed into the dining room and were served with a hearty meal. Long they lingered over the wine that night and the hour was late when at last they sought their couches. Iddin felt himself honored when he stretched his limbs upon the couch long used by the man he hoped soon would be king of Babylon.

Immediately after the early morning service in the temple, the three men set out upon their errands, the two younger to begin their recruiting, and the elder to arrange for the finances. Iddin and Heber were mounted while Neboakhu rode in the chariot once used by Nabomuran, Captain of the Guard. Shortly after crossing the canal they separated, the young men turning off to the left in order to avoid the more populous

streets and the chief priest keeping straight on toward the center of the city. At the market place his chariot turned to the left and passed down one block, drawing up before a substantial edifice, apparently a place of business. Upon the stone lintel over the wide doorway these words were cut:

EGIBI AND SONS

It was therefore to the foremost bankers of the ancient world that the old man made his morning visit. A servant met him at the doorway and conducted him through the counting room, where a dozen clerks were at work recording the affairs of the house upon blocks of clay, into a handsomely appointed waiting room. His inquiry for the head of the firm elicited the information that he was at the moment engaged with two distinguished clients.

"I will wait," said the old man.

His period of waiting was by no means a short one but he sat patiently. At length the door of an inner room opened and a clerk showed two men out. They were Vulmaran, the rab mag, and Ninabeth, the treasurer. So the king was borrowing!

The clerk who had showed them out, beckoned to Neboakhu to enter. The chief priest followed him into the room and in another moment stood face to face with the power behind the throne, the man who controlled the king's finances.

"Is it indeed Neboakhu who visits me?" asked the great banker, rising to greet his guest.

"It is I, friend Egibi," replied the priest, smiling.

"It is many a day since we have met, yet once we were good friends. However thou hast thy duties as well as I mine," continued the banker.

They conversed upon unimportant matters for a few moments as old friends will when they meet, but the banker's time

was of value and he soon inquired the cause of Neboakhu's visit.

"I am come for the same purpose that brings all thy patrons here. I am come to borrow."

"Have the revenues of the temple also failed?"

"Nay, I wish to borrow for another cause."

The banker waited for him to continue.

"I can trust thee not to reveal the cause I represent?" inquired the priest before proceeding.

"For shame, Neboakhu. Thou knowest our house and knowest that not since our fathers started this business have we ever revealed the affairs of a client," said Egibi with the least show of resentment.

"I know, I know, but this present affair is of so delicate a nature that I must have thy special assurance," persisted the priest.

"Thou hast it."

"Know then, friend Egibi, I want funds to make a king."

"To make a king?"

"Ah, to seat our lawful king upon his father's throne."

"Sheshbazzar is at last found?"

"He is. My son Nabomuran is the prince."

"Is it possible? A fine youth he is too. How much will it require to make him king?"

"Five hundred talents of gold," was the reply.

"Five hundred talents!" shouted the banker, leaping from his chair.

"That is the amount needed. We must be certain. With that sum we can win," answered the priest.

"By the gods, Neboakhu, thinkest thou such a sum can be had for the asking?"

"I have security."

"What is thy security?"

"The treasures of the temple," was the reply made in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. The banker started.

"They are the property of the gods," he said.

"There are no gods," answered Neboakhu.

"Ha! At last we agree upon that point. It was long a subject of discussion between us."

"We are not quite agreed," said the priest. "I am slowly inclining to a new belief. I more than half believe there is one God and only one."

And that is?"

"The God of the Jews."

There was silence. Here was a polytheist, a heathen if you will, teaching a man whose forefathers were Jews, which was the true God. Egibi was silent and sad. When at last he spoke there were tears in his eyes.

"Ah, Neboakhu, I sometimes think that is true," he said solemnly.

A moment later he was again the stern man of business.

"I cannot grant thy request," he said. "For the first time in my career I am about to reveal the affairs of a client. I do so knowing thou wilt hold my confidence inviolate. I have just refused the king a loan upon the same security."

"The king has no right to offer it," said the priest sharply.

"Possibly not," replied the banker, "but it was not on that account I refused the loan. The case is this: The Persians are about to capture Babylon and will seize all the treasures in the city. Where then would be my security?"

"I am not so sure of their success as thou seemest," said the priest.

"I am sure," said the banker. "Drop this king making, Neboakhu. It is dangerous business, especially for men of our age."

"Not I," replied the priest majestically. "I shall fight myself, if need be, to place our rightful king upon the throne. Can we but seat him before the Persians come we need not fear them."

"Possibly, but I must refuse to make the loan. I regret the necessity. For old friendship's sake I would be glad to grant

it, but to do so in the face of the present uncertainty would be unwise."

"I have a last resort," said the priest.

"What is that?"

"Use the security itself."

"That is a matter for thee to settle with thyself," said the banker.

The priest arose to depart and the banker arose to bid him farewell.

"The man of business refused thy request, Neboakhu, but the private man hopes for thy success," said the Jew smiling.

"Many thanks for thy good wishes, Egibi," said the priest, adding: "I bear thee no ill will for thy refusal."

"Were it not for the black clouds in the north, my friend, every shekel in our coffers would be at thy disposal," the banker said in parting.

The priest departed, leaving the man of finance to his vaults and his bars of gold. That evening the three men compared their experience. Iddin announced the result of his and Heber's recruiting as upwards of a thousand men, but he added sorrowfully that they had been unable to find any trace of Shemakin.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE HANGING GARDENS

The day following Orma's conversation with her father concerning the lost prince of Judah, she was again sitting in her bower occupied with her embroidery. Her thoughts were still dwelling upon her lover and his fate, but she was not as preoccupied as on the preceding day.

It was shortly after noon, an hour when all who could do so were taking their midday nap, but the day was a particularly cool one for the climate and the time of year, making her retreat far from uncomfortable even in the heat of the day. She

had just parted from her father who followed the custom of the country as regarded a nap after dinner.

Orma had been seated in her bower but a few moments when Ruth came to inform her a servant from the palace desired speech with her. This was nothing unusual as, since her connection with her royal friends at the palace, she had been sent for upon several occasions. She gave orders to have the messenger conducted to her presence and Ruth piloted him thither. Orma recognized him at once as the same man who had brought her similar messages upon previous occasions. He handed her a silken bag containing a small tablet of clay upon which a message was engraved. It was worded something after this manner:

The Palace,
5th Tammuz.

TO ORMA, DAUGHTER OF NEHUM:

May the blessings of the gods rest upon thee. Canst thou meet me in the gardens by the reservoir immediately? I have news of importance to communicate unto thee. The bearer of this, my message, will conduct thee thither.

NITOCRIS.

"Art thou to conduct me to the gardens?" she asked the slave.

"Such are my orders," he answered quietly.

"Wait thou here one moment and I will be ready to accompany thee," she said.

She ran into the house, returning in a moment. During her absence she had added a soft fleecy wrap to her attire, and had thrown a light silken shawl over her head.

"I am ready," she said.

The servant preceded her to the street. Orma stopped only to leave Ruth a message for her father, and then followed him. Before the house stood a simple chariot, waiting to convey her to the Hanging Gardens. The servant assisted her to enter the vehicle and stepped up beside her. The driver had evi-

dently received his orders, for no words passed between the two men. As soon as his passengers were in the chariot, he gave his steeds the lash.

After a half hour's drive through the nearly deserted streets the chariot drew up beside the land entrance to the gardens, a broad brick platform from which the first flight of stone steps led upwards to the first of the four terraces. The servant alighted at once and held out his hand to Orma. She barely touched her finger tips to his as she sprang out upon the landing. The servant spoke a few words to the driver, who bowed in acknowledgment and then drove away. The servant, directing Orma to follow him, started to mount the broad steps. She followed him blindly, wondering what it all meant, but trusting in the magic word "Nitocris."

As they hurried along the path leading from the summit of the first flight of stairs to the base of the second, Orma feasted upon the incomparable beauty of the scene about her. Every known country had given its best and most beautiful to adorn the fairyland Nebuchadnezzar raised on high as a plaything for his Median queen. Tall palms and stately poplars intermingled their swaying branches; flowering plants and shrubs from every clime lent their sweetest perfumes to the air. Fruits from the north and fruits from the south were mingled in an indiscriminate orchard, while beneath, half hidden in the velvety greensward, the rarest of flowers raised their dainty heads. Here and there a sweet-smelling honeysuckle wound round and round a stately trunk until its blossoms were hidden in the dense foliage.

It was the beauty of wild nature, with hardly a glimpse of man's handiwork. No mathematical flower beds, no trees pruned into fantastic shapes, no spelling of names in flowers. The very paths led at random through the masses of verdure with never a hint of regularity or precision. It was yet the very height of artistic gardening. Small animals, against whom no weapon had ever been raised, ran in and out through the underbrush without fear; so tame that they paid little heed to

the presence of a human figure. The antelope merely raised its pretty head and gazed curiously out of its gentle eyes. The nervous hare but stopped his gambols for an instant and then frisked about again.

The servant, giving Orma but little opportunity to gaze on the beauties of this artificial paradise, hurried along the path toward the stairs leading up to the second terrace. Up they went, down a path, up another flight of stairs and so on until the topmost stage was reached. Here the servant left her after pointing down a path and saying: "Keep straight on and thou wilt find the queen waiting for thee."

Orma hesitated a moment and then walked slowly, not without misgivings, in the direction he had indicated. Thus far she had met no human being since alighting from the chariot, but as it was an hour of the day at which few people were abroad (and they only of the lowest classes) and further since the gardens were not open to the general public, she need feel no surprise at being alone. Still the solitariness of the place oppressed her and the first feeling of fear came over her as she thought how strange was the manner in which she had been brought here. She remembered how quiet and melancholy the servant had been. On previous occasions she had always been conducted to the queen's apartments.

"Mayhap it is no longer safe for us to meet there," she reasoned to assure herself.

At the moment these words formed themselves in her mind she turned a sharp corner and emerged upon a broad terrace before a small but handsomely constructed villa. Directly before her stood a divan formed of the twisted branches of trees. Upon the divan sat a woman, her face toward the villa and her back toward Orma. The girl sprang forward eagerly all her fears dispelled. As she was about to speak the woman turned. It was not Nitocris! Seeing the girl she smiled.

"Come, my dear, be seated. Thou must be weary after climbing all these steps," she said.

Her voice was soft and musical but deeply tinged with sad-

ness and, as Orma looked upon her, she noted the tragic melancholy printed upon her beautiful face.

"Why art thou here?" asked the woman after Orma had seated herself.

"I came at Queen Nitocris's bidding to meet her here," replied the girl.

"Queen Nitocris? Here?" exclaimed the woman in tones of the deepest surprise. "Queen Nitocris has not visited this place in many years."

"Knowest thou what yonder villa is?" she asked a moment later.

"Nay," replied Orma. "I have never before visited the gardens."

"It is the residence of the king's concubines."

Orma started. "And thou?" she asked.

"Oh, I am one of the concubines," answered the woman bitterly.

Unconsciously Orma drew away from her but the unfortunate woman noticed it and said:

"Fear me not, girl. I cannot hurt thee."

As she spoke a low whistle was heard in the shrubbery near by. The woman arose quickly, glanced apprehensively about and, bending low over Orma, thrust something into her hand.

"I must go," she whispered. "Quick! Hide this!"

"This" was a small dagger with a gem-studded handle. Orma glanced in fright at the woman and hurriedly hid the dagger in the bosom of her gown. The next moment she was alone.

There was a rustle in the bushes and with a frightened look Orma turned in that direction. As she faced about a young man, gaily attired, stepped out of the bushes. He bowed low and approached her with an air of the greatest gallantry. As he neared her he doffed his silken cap with a sweeping bow. Orma shuddered as she recognized in the youth Belshazzar, King of Babylon.

"Ah, my lady, is it chance that gives me the long sought opportunity of meeting thee?" he asked suavely.

"Nay, not chance; villainy," she answered passionately.

"Hard words ill become such lips as thine, my sweet," he said with a smirk.

She stepped backward.

"What, afraid of thy lover?" he said stepping toward her.

"Thou art not my lover," she cried, hardly realizing what she said.

"Ah, but I am, my black-haired queen," he replied.

"Come," he added, "be not afraid of me. I am here to plead with thee, to offer thee the honor of becoming Babylon's queen."

"Thou art already married," she said.

"Yea," said the king, "I am married if thou wilt call it so, but I would make thee first. These are not wives." He waved his hand toward the villa.

"If thou hast any pity for a defenseless girl, O King, thou wilt let me depart at once," said Orma, stepping to one side that she might pass him.

"Not so fast, my pretty," said Belshazzar, blocking her way. "Thou art in my power now and shall not leave this place against my will. Thou shalt become my wife, peaceably if thou wilt consent, by force if thou art stubborn."

She trembled violently. She had long feared the youth. Several times he had stopped her in the palace halls but she had always successfully evaded him. Now she felt herself alone without a friend. She reasoned that Belshazzar would not attempt such an enterprise without being attended. Even now yonder bushes might conceal his slaves whom she knew would obey his every word or motion. She remembered the dagger and was on the point of reaching for it when she changed her mind, thinking it best not to reveal its existence so soon. It might prove of more value later. Then, too, she realized that if, as she supposed, he had slaves near they could easily disarm her. She therefore made no attempt to produce

the dagger but stood defiant, waiting to see what his next move would be.

Belshazzar stood irresolute, watching her and gazing longingly upon her. His eyes were inflamed with passion and boy though he was, she trembled before him.

"Remember, girl," he said at length, "if thou consentest without obliging me to use force it is honorable marriage I offer thee, but if thou forcest me to use violence, there will be no marriage."

Orma looked defiantly into his face, her full lips curved with contempt and loathing for the youthful libertine.

"I cannot consent to such a marriage," she said. "Beside I have already given my promise to a man whose death I fear is upon thy head."

"I know not thy meaning, girl," said Belshazzar, genuinely surprised, for he had not been present when Vulmaran made his announcement and arrangements for capturing Sheshbazzar were discussed.

"I mean that the day before yesterday thy soldiers took him who some day—perhaps—will be my husband and carried him away to prison."

"By Nebo girl, I know nothing of this matter. I swear no one has been taken prisoner of late so far as I am aware."

"It may have been thy father."

"No," he said, "I am aware of all my father doeth. There have been no prisoners taken of late. To be sure we are searching for one Sheshbazzar but I fear he will never be taken."

"He is the man," she said quickly, and then bit her lips in vexation. She could have bitten off her tongue once the words were said, but it was too late. If they had him prisoner they evidently knew not his identity, and she felt she had murdered him. Now that she had acknowledged him her lover Belshazzar would doubly hate him. She felt sick at heart because of her thoughtless speech. So intent was she upon her own

thoughts that she noticed not the effect her words produced upon her tempter.

The boy king started at mention of Sheshbazzar's name; his face assumed an expression of joy and eagerness, but this soon died out.

"Nay, by the gods, that were news too good to be true. Had he been captured I would be the first to hear of it. I swear, girl, thou art wrong."

"I may be," she said, hoping to retrieve her error.

"How much better would it be to marry one already a king than one who aspires to be," pursued Belshazzar, returning to the original subject.

"Better Sheshbazzar a slave than thou a king," she cried hotly.

"Oh, ho, is that thine answer?" he asked.

"Thou mayest take it for an answer if thou choosest," she said.

"Think, girl, what thy refusal meanest and think also what it is thou refusest. I swear by Bel I would raise thee to my rank and make thee my queen. I tell thee again I will love and marry thee if thou consentest, but if this refusal is persisted in——" he pointed toward the villa.

"Thou wouldst love me until another caught thy fancy," she said.

"Nay, girl. I swear I love thee. I will make thee my wife and my queen in one. I swear to love and honor thee."

"And these?" she cried, pointing to the villa.

A cloud passed over the brow of the young king.

"Remember," he said, "there are two kings in Babylon. With the inmates of yonder pavilion I have little concern, but I swear to thee if thou wilt become my wife I will forsake all others for thee alone."

"It is of no use, O King. I do not love thee and never can. Besides, think of our rank; thou a king and I but a captive maiden."

"Speak not of rank," he said, "and as for love, I can make thee love me. Come, my sweet, what sayest thou?"

"It cannot be. Now I pray thee let me go," she cried.

"Go! Never! Thou canst only go with me."

"I shall not go with thee," she cried as, before the astonished king could stop her, she leaped past him, and ran down the path toward the stairs with a speed born of desperation. It was a useless attempt. What could she do alone? As she ran past a clump of bushes a negro sprang out and caught her by the shoulder, bringing her to an abrupt stop. Another followed and another. In a trice she found herself bound, gagged and hoodwinked.

She was caught up and thrown upon the shoulders of her captors. A few moments later she could feel them climbing a few steps. As a door closed behind them, the realization of where she was being taken came to her with sickening distinctness. There was but one building in the vicinity and that the king's harem!

Her bearers kept on down a long hall and then paused before what she judged to be her cell. A moment later she felt herself lowered. She was laid gently upon a couch and apparently left alone for she heard those who had brought her depart, closing the door behind them. In another moment, however, she was conscious of deft fingers at work untying her bonds. First her limbs were freed, then the gag was removed and at last the napkin fell from her eyes. She blinked a moment and then looked about her.

A rapid glance revealed the nature of her prison. It was a small but luxuriously furnished apartment, lighted by a large latticed window that looked out upon the great reservoir whose waters washed the base of the Hanging Gardens. After making a swift inventory of the room she looked for the jailer who had freed her bonds. At the head of the couch, seated upon a low hassock, was the woman she had seen in the garden. Orma sprang up with a cry of hatred.

"Harlot," she cried, "thou hast betrayed me into the hands of this man."

"Be seated, girl," said the woman with a sad smile. "True it is I was required to sit yonder in the garden and detain thee there but it was done against my will. Trust me. I may be of service to thee."

Orma touched her gently on the arm as she said: "Forgive me, I knew not what I said."

"I cannot stay here," said the woman rising to depart. At the doorway she stopped, turned towards the girl and said:

"Remember what I gave thee and hesitate not to use it. Believe me, death is far preferable to life in this den of wickedness."

A moment later she was gone, but almost immediately the door opened again and another entered. The newcomer was Belshazzar.

CHAPTER XXXII

A WORD OF WARNING

Upon the morning of their second day's stay in Babylon Heber and Iddin left the chief priest's house early. Both had arisen with a firm determination to make that day's work much more satisfactory than the previous one had been. As Neboakhu had well said they must gain recruits faster than that if Sheshbazzar was ever to become king.

From their stopping place they went directly to the great military camp without the walls. They found a most animated scene. During several days past large bodies of soldiery had been arriving at the capital from all the adjacent portions of the empire, until no less than sixty thousand men were encamped upon the great plain. This day was the one appointed for breaking camp and starting upon the march to Sippara.

Already one corps was there while another was directly opposed to the Persian lines near Accad.

After the infantry had broken camp and gotten well under way the cavalry was to mobilize upon the same spot and when organized they too were to march northward. The latter, owing to their great rapidity of motion were expected to reach Sippara at about the same time as the infantry.

The young men put in a busy day, mingling with the troops and dropping now and then a few words to lead on the men. Notwithstanding their efforts the recruits came slowly. At noon not over two hundred men had agreed to fall out of line at the old tomb and join the pretender's forces. All of those who refused to join the movement had the same excuse, "The Persians." Truly the rebellion of Sheshbazzar was ill-timed. At another period when no outside forces had to be reckoned with he might have been successful. Nevertheless the day was crowded with interest for the young men. They watched as regiment after regiment formed ranks and marched away to join the defenders at the north.

Shortly after noon they were astonished to see two bodies of cavalry wheel into the field and prepare to go into camp. They were ahead of time by at least one day. The surprise of the young men was still further increased by seeing the arrival of the Winged Lions, who came on the field less than an hour after the other horsemen. Curious to ascertain the cause of this change of program they sought out Belibus. The young chieftain welcomed both most cordially. He smiled as he addressed Heber. The young Jew had some misgivings regarding his reception at the hands of his former adversary, but the soldier's greeting placed him at ease immediately. Belibus had once turned him over to the king and felt therefore he had no further duty with him.

"What brings all these horsemen here at this time?" asked Iddin when the greetings were over.

"I know not, unless some reconnoissance is to be made. A spy named Shemakin had the king's ear this morning and imme-

diately after we were ordered into camp. I suspect the spy brought news of the Persians' actions, but I have received no orders to indicate our destination," said Belibus.

"I can tell thee what this means," said Iddin. The mention of Shemakin's name had shown him all. He then told Belibus of the location of Sheshbazzar and his band and of Shemakin's defection. He made no mention of Cyrus's name or deeds, however.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Belibus. "What am I to do? I am a soldier of Babylon but I cannot fight my old commander. This is a poor time for his step, Iddin. We here had decided to drop our plans until the Persians were first disposed of. We have accordingly passed the word along to all in our confidence."

"That then accounts for our lack of success today," said Heber.

"I can advise thee what to do, Belibus," said Iddin.

"I am listening."

"When thou art sent against the prince, instead of opposing him, join thy forces to his."

"I have long intended joining him and my command will follow me. The only perplexity, Iddin, is to decide how to join him."

"A way must be found, Belibus. We need the help of thyself and thy men. We must strike before the Persians do."

"Iddin," said the soldier sadly, "I am despondent today. I feel defeat awaits our army. I fear we must prepare our necks to receive the Persian yoke. Rumor has it the army of Cyrus cannot be numbered, while the largest force we can muster will be less than two hundred thousand. Even with that force a skilful leader could work wonders, but we have no leader. Ah, Iddin, I feel our beloved city and empire are doomed. If we are defeated by the Persians what can Sheshbazzar do?"

"Do?" cried Iddin, "Sheshbazzar can do anything, everything. If our army is defeated at Sippara he can rally the rem-

nant, take Babylon and defy the Persian to oust him. Yonder walls can be neither scaled nor breached."

"I would I had the hope thou hast, Iddin, but depend upon one thing; the Winged Lions will not fight against the man who once commanded them. Thou knowest ours is no ordinary military organization. We are a secret brotherhood bound together by sacred vows. Those vows compel us to stand by one another through everything. Sheshbazzar is still a member of our brotherhood and is our secret leader, though not our public commander. Therefore when he needs us we will not be found wanting."

Belibus spoke in a serious convincing manner that inspired confidence in his hearers. Having thus spoken the soldier turned away from them to direct his men in their preparations for camping. Soon after Heber left Iddin to continue his work, while he spent a short time in his father's company.

Upon reaching his home he tied his horse to a small tree beside the road. He passed around the house and through the garden to Orma's bower, but it was deserted. Retracing his steps to the front of the dwelling he entered by the wide doorway. He searched through all the rooms of the lower floor but found no one. Therefore he climbed the stairs to the second story and continued his search through the chambers. He paused at the door of Orma's sleeping apartment and knocked several times, but received no response. At length the muffled tones of a man's voice reached him. He recognized them as his father's and turned to listen that he might discover from whence they came. He at once discovered them to come from a room at the further end of the hall from Orma's chamber. He walked rapidly up the hall toward the front of the house. Upon reaching the door he stopped a moment to listen again. Nehum was praying. Heber pushed the door open and slipped quietly into the room.

Before an open window, looking toward Jerusalem, the old man knelt with his arms uplifted to Heaven. His whole frame trembled with the deepest emotion as he poured forth an urg-

ent supplication to Deity. Heber listened unwillingly but not liking to interrupt his father.

"Oh my Father," the old man cried, "Why has this affliction been sent upon me? Why hast thou taken both my children from me? My son, my first born to die in prison and my daughter, the last comfort of an old man's heart is now torn from me. Oh Lord God, I beseech thee restore my precious jewel unto me. Stay thou the lust of the heathen that she return unto me unspotted."

Heber could wait no longer. He must learn the meaning of his father's impassioned words. His sister! His idolized sister! What had come upon her to call forth such heart-rending sobs as mingled with the old man's petitions?

"Father!" he cried. "Tell me the meaning of thy words! Tell me what calamity has fallen upon my sister!"

Nehum ceased speaking, but remained in the same position. He knelt motionless as one spellbound. Was he dreaming or did he really hear the voice of his first born?

"Father, arise and tell me the cause of thy sorrow. If aught has befallen my sister we will raise our voices together that she may be saved and restored unto us," said Heber.

As he spoke these words he had crossed the room. He now grasped his father's trembling hand that he might assist. The old man arose slowly and painfully from his knees and when erect he stood an instant gazing into his son's face. He was at first bewildered, but when the realization that this apparition was his own Heber alive and well came over him, he opened his arms and clasped the young man to his bosom in a long, fond embrace.

"My son, my son," he cried. "Hast thou at last returned to thy father's arms?"

"Yea, father, it is thy wayward boy again returned to claim thy love and forgiveness. Tell me though I beg thee, father, what has befallen my sister."

Heber led his father to a convenient couch and when they

were seated the old man related all he knew concerning Orma's disappearance.

"I fear," he said in closing, "she has been carried away to a life worse than death. Of late she has been often to the palace to confer with the queen, and several times she has been stopped in the hall by the young king. She has spoken to me of her fear of him. Boy though he is, he is already notorious for his lewdness, and I fear me, Heber, he has lured our precious flower away for lustful reasons. This morning I sent a message to the queen that I might learn if she it was who sent for thy sister. She returned answer that she knew nothing of the matter, but added that she would take steps to learn of Orma's whereabouts."

Heber leaped to his feet crazed by grief and rage.

"May the Lord have mercy upon the man who has abducted her; I shall not. I swear to kill him if we meet," he cried.

"My son, vengeance is the Lord's," said the old man solemnly.

Heber strode up and down the apartment, his hands tightly clenched and his face twitching convulsively. For months he had been looking forward to this visit, to meeting with his father and sister. Now to have all his pleasant anticipations crushed in this manner was a disappointment greater seemingly than he could bear. His father meanwhile sat silent upon the divan watching his son's emotion and waiting for the first outburst to pass away. At length he spoke.

"Heber, my boy," he said, "come and sit beside me. Tell me concerning thyself. For a year we have mourned thee as one dead. Where hast thou been and how hast thou escaped from the hands of the king?"

Thus entreated Heber calmed himself and reseated himself at his father's side. He related all that had befallen him since the eventful night when he had attempted to lead his people to liberty. Nor did he fail to tell all, even to his own marriage. The old man listened attentively until his son had finished.

"Where is Tirmar thy wife?" he asked simply.

"She is in the camp of the Persians, ministering unto Queen Cassandane," was the reply.

"Thou wilt have some sad news to convey unto her. Her father, Josedek, has been called away from earth."

"Then Joshua is high priest?"

"Ay, my son, and a noble man he is. But what brings thee here at this time? Art thou here in thy patron's service?" asked Nehum.

"Nay, father, I am here seeking men to join Prince Sheshbazzar in his attempt to win the throne."

"Sheshbazzar?" exclaimed Nehum. "We supposed him again in the hands of his enemies."

"Captured he was, father, but the soldiers of King Cyrus rescued him."

"Ah, Heber, if thy sister could only learn of this," and the old man shook his head sadly.

"Are they to marry, father?" asked Heber. "I have sometimes thought there was something between them."

"They love, Heber, but I have not given my permission to a betrothal. I cannot allow thy sister to become his wife while he remains an idolater."

"Thou art right, father," said Heber, speaking as an adviser would.

"I am praying that the noble prince may learn to love our God. Were he a worshiper of Jehovah gladly would I bestow thy sister upon him."

"I fear he never will, father. These Babylonians are a proud, conceited race. Were he sure our God was the true God his pride would prevent his acknowledging it."

They sat until nearly dusk conversing together. At last Heber reluctantly arose to depart. His father motioned him to kneel and the old man poured out a brief prayer of thanks for Heber's return and of supplication for Orma's safety. After a final embrace Heber departed.

That evening the three men sat in the library of Neboakhu's

residence conversing upon the subject uppermost in their thoughts. Their discussion was interrupted by the entrance of a servant who informed them a soldier waited without desiring to speak with them at once.

"Show him in," ordered Neboakhu.

The servant returned a moment later followed by the soldier. All three arose to greet the newcomer who was Belibus.

"I am come to tell thee of the king's plans," he said. "A messenger has been sent forward with orders for three thousand footmen to halt at the prince's camp, and the two thousand horse that went into camp today are to start before daybreak. Their orders are to bring Sheshbazzar back dead or alive, but the king warned the commander to take him alive if possible. The Winged Lions are not to go after all. We are to wait and accompany the king when he starts for the front. Thou, Iddin, must leave the city. Thy presence in the city and thy connection with the prince are both known. Do not wait for daylight but go immediately. Come, I will accompany thee and see thee safely through the gates. Ride all night and place Sheshbazzar on his guard."

Iddin hastened to the apartment he had occupied during his stay beneath Neboakhu's roof and made such preparations for his hurried departure as were necessary. Immediately after he reappeared in the library, he and Belibus said farewell to the others and departed.

At the door stood the ever-faithful Kudur holding three horses, the forethought of Belibus having provided Iddin with a fresh mount. They vaulted into their saddles without speaking. Belibus took the lead that he might set the pace, and the others followed in single file. They rode slowly for fear speed might cause suspicion, but the streets through which they took their way were dark and well nigh deserted. Fortunate it was for Iddin that the location of Neboakhu's house enabled him to reach the wall without traversing the principal streets of the city. At the slow trot Belibus deemed necessary it took them twenty minutes to reach the gate in the inner wall. They

experienced no difficulty in passing this point but Belibus had misgivings as to their being as successful at the outer wall.

Upon reaching the great outer gate he put on a bold face and demanded that the gates be opened at once.

"By what authority?" demanded the officer in charge.

"By authority of the king. Open the gates for the king's messenger. For the love of thy nation open and delay not. The very life of our nation depends upon this message," replied Belibus. His last saying was true though in a different way than he wished the officer to understand it.

"I must have a pass, sir. Thou knowest how strict are the present orders about opening the gates after dark," said the officer.

Belibus made no reply but beckoned the officer to approach. The man obeyed, apparently with reluctance. Belibus leaned over and whispered a single word in his ear. The effect was magical. The officer turned instantly and walked rapidly toward the small guard house just under the great wall. He called out two soldiers who quickly undid the fastenings of the great bronze gates and swung one of them open sufficiently for a horseman to pass through. Iddin bade his friend a hasty farewell and a moment later dashed through the opening.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ORMA AND BELSHAZZAR

When Orma beheld Belshazzar actually within her chamber, the very lifeblood of her heart seemed to cease its tumultuous career. She leaped from the couch and rested her hand upon its head for support. Her every limb trembled; she was cold from head to foot. At that moment she could have prayed for the earth to open and engulf her rather than become the slave of this man. Meanwhile the young king stood still near the door and looked her over calmly.

For several moments, moments that seemed as many eternities to the unfortunate girl, they stood thus facing each other, the one frozen by fear, the other inflamed with passion. Up to this moment Orma had scarcely realized the peril that assailed her, so sudden had it all been; but now, as she saw the light in the king's eyes she was conscious of his intentions and the thought of them sapped her remaining strength. She tottered and would have fallen but for the support of the couch.

Belshazzar, unable to restrain himself longer, took a few steps forward. Involuntarily Orma took as many backward. This movement placed her in the corner of the room from whence there could be no retreat. She stood braced against the wall, looking piteously at her foe much as a poor hunted doe might make her stand against some ancient trunk and face the pitiless hounds which had chased her all the day.

Belshazzar smiled a coarse, sensual smile, as he realized how completely within his power was this beautiful creature. For months as he had seen her upon her occasional visits at the palace he had longed for this moment, and now it had come. Still he seemed in no hurry, but lingered to feast his eyes upon her. Her respite was not for long, as in another moment he approached her, one hand outheld as a sign of friendship. She crouched still farther into her corner, if that were possible. Belshazzar could perceive her fright, but it had no effect upon him. Still he approached her, a calm smile upon his face.

"Ah, my pretty, is this the way to receive thy husband?" he said smiling.

"Husband," she hissed between her closed teeth, "it were insult to the word coming from thy lips."

"What, still defiant?" he asked laughing.

She made no reply.

He was now within an arm's reach of her. To Orma it seemed as if her heart stopped beating and her breath ceased. He reached out his hand and touched her upon her shoulder. Instantly she threw his arm away with a violent blow. He

stepped back astonished that so terrified a creature could defend herself.

"That was not pretty," he said still preserving his calm exterior, though inward fires consumed him.

He stood still a moment, the doe holding the hounds at bay. He was for the time being irresolute. The girl's spirit was unlooked for, and he was but a boy. Still his passion urged him on and would not give up the strife so soon. Again he approached the corner in which she crouched, but he made no attempt to touch her.

"My dear," he said in his most persuasive tone, "it is wrong for thee to thus spurn me from thee. Remember I am King of Babylon and the position I offer thee is an honorable one."

"Honorable?" she said with a bitter laugh.

"As I told thee before, I offer thee honorable marriage if thou consentest of thine own will. Think, girl, thou art in my power. No power on earth can save thee. Have thee I will so thou wouldst best accept my offer and become my wife."

"I gave thee my answer. Thinkest thou thy treatment since has been such as to change my mind?"

"I regret the violence, but I gave thee warning. I was in earnest. Thou art deserving of the worst but I love thee enough to make me plead with thee. Listen, girl, I lied to thee in the garden. Sheshbazzar has been captured and tonight he goes into the drowning chamber to die like a rat. Because of my love for thee I will set him at liberty if thou wilt consent to become my wife."

Intuitively she felt he was insincere. His surprise at her announcing the prince's capture had been too perfect for acting. She was confident that he lied in the last speech and not in the first.

"I have said all I shall ever say. I will not marry thee." She spoke defiantly. Since she had so easily repulsed him she had gained confidence.

"Come, I will give thee one more chance. Think, girl, what it means to be queen of Babylon. Thou shalt be honored above

all. Everything thy heart desires thou shalt have. Thy life will be a happy one surrounded by wealth and comfort."

"Nay, King, such things tempt me not. I have given thee my answer. I can say no more."

An expression of intense passion came over the face of the boy king and he made another movement toward her. Instantly Orma threw open her long robe, exposing her bosom, Snatching the dagger she held it aloft ready to strike.

"One step nearer," she cried, "and I will plunge this dagger into my heart. Thou shalt not dishonor my living body."

Belshazzar retreated in dismay and to Orma's great surprise he left the room. On the threshold he stopped and turned to say:

"Thou hast the advantage this time, but think not I am thus easily baffled. When I come again I shall have assistance. Another time thou canst not escape me."

After he had gone Orma threw herself upon the couch, face downward and gave way completely to her sorrows. A flood of tears wet the silken pillow and her whole body quivered. Deep convulsive sobs racked her, showing the intensity of her grief. As she lay there she prayed as she had never prayed before; prayed that the threatened disgrace might pass over her. At length thoughts of the man who loved her came into her mind and she longed for some method of notifying him of her plight. She knew full well if he could learn of her whereabouts no power on earth could prevent his coming to her aid. Then the thought of his being a prisoner also came into her mind and the last vestige of hope left her. She wondered which of Belshazzar's statements concerning the prince to believe. She was inclined to believe the boy ignorant of the capture.

Finally she fell asleep and dreamed of home and loved ones. When she awoke it was night and she was in utter darkness. She sat up fearful. She was afraid to go to sleep again lest Belshazzar should return while she was unconscious. She listened intently but nothing could be heard, save the gentle wash

of the water beneath and an occasional cry from some night bird perched among the branches in the garden. She lay down again resolving to keep awake, but in a few moments she was asleep. The nervous strain she had undergone was more than nature could withstand and sleep came unbidden.

When she awoke it was broad daylight. The warm morning sun was shining in at her window, throwing one broad beam across her face. She arose and made her toilet as well as the means at hand permitted. Then she drew a stool to the window and seated herself. With her elbows upon the sill and her chin supported upon her hands, she sat looking out upon the scene of beauty about and below her. She remained in this position until the opening of the door aroused her. She turned quickly fearing Belshazzar had returned according to his promise, but she was at once reassured. It was only the woman who had given her the dagger, coming with her breakfast. The woman spread the viands out upon a low table and invited the prisoner to partake of them.

While she was eating Orma told the woman (whom she now trusted fully) of all that had taken place the preceding afternoon. The woman listened attentively. When Orma had finished speaking she said:

"Thou hast escaped him for the time being, but I fear, my girl, 'twill not be for long. I know nothing of this boy but if he be like unto his father nothing but death can save thee."

To Orma the words sounded harsh but they were actuated by sentiments of the deepest pity.

"Alas!" cried the girl, "what am I to do?"

"There is but one way of escape. That way I have provided for thee."

"Oh, but I do not want to die."

"My dear girl," said the woman tenderly, placing one arm about Orma. "Believe what I say. For twenty years, since I was a girl of sixteen, have I been a concubine of the kings of Babylon and I say unto thee, far better is everlasting death than one hour of the terrible misery of this life."

Orma looked up sadly into her face. She was forgetful of her own troubles in thinking of the terrible life this poor woman had led.

"Oh, I am so sorry for thee," she said tenderly.

The woman said nothing but she looked the thanks she felt for the girl's sympathy. Neither spoke for some moments. Orma was the first to break the silence.

"If only my lover were at liberty and I could get word to him. All the king's soldiers could not keep him away," she said.

"Thy lover, girl? Is he a prisoner?"

"I fear so. He was taken prisoner by the soldiers but Belshazzar denies all knowledge of his capture."

"What is his name?" asked the woman.

"Sheshbazzar," replied Orma.

"Sheshbazzar!" she cried. "Has he then announced himself? Is he striving to gain his rights?"

"He has not announced himself publicly as yet but he was preparing to step forward when he was captured. But dost thou know of him?"

"Know of him?" she said. "Did I not give my babe that he might live?"

"Thou?" exclaimed Orma. "Art thou the girl that changed the children?"

"I *was* the girl," answered the woman bitterly.

"Oh, tell me of it," cried Orma.

Thus invited the woman began a narrative of the utmost interest to her auditor.

"My name is Maraida," she began. "I am like thyself a daughter of Judah. I know nothing of my parents save that they were Jews. For all I know I was born in the palace. My earliest remembrance is of living there. When I was old enough I was given some task to perform and when I was fourteen I was appointed to serve the queen. Thus it happened I was in the queen's service at the time of her husband's murder.

"I was in the room with the queen when the old priest came running in with the news that men were killing the king. A moment later the king himself came running followed by those who sought to slay him. At that moment I thought of changing my babe for the young prince and in an instant the old priest and I had made the change. Alas, my poor little boy, but I suppose it was for the best. So he has arisen to claim his right and thou, a Jewess, art his sweetheart.

"The rest of my life thou canst guess. Forced by the vile Neriglissar, he who slew Evil-Merodach, to become his concubine I have since been the property of two other kings. I have lived a life of ease and luxury but it has been worse than death. My lot has been far better than that of some of my less fortunate sisters as my beauty has lasted longer. Today though I am nearly forty years of age I am still the favorite of Nabonidos."

"Maraida," said Orma sternly, "answer me one question. Was this babe thou sacrificed thine own?"

The woman was confused and did not reply immediately. When she did speak Orma was convinced that she spoke the truth.

"To tell thee all," she said, "the child was not mine but belonged to a Jewish woman who was very ill for a long time. I took care of it from the day it was born."

"Rememberest thou the child's name?"

"I do, plainly. It was Zerubbabel."

"Ah, Maraida," said Orma sadly, "that babe was the direct descendant of King David. Were he living today he would be our prince."

"Alas!" exclaimed Maraida, "that I, a Jew, should be the means of ending our royal line."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BATTLE AT THE CAMP

Early in the morning of the fourth day following the departure of his lieutenants for Babylon, Sheshbazzar stood at the entrance of his camp looking off in the direction of the great city. Beneath, upon the borders of the great road, a large body of infantry was encamped. The presence of the king's troops troubled him, for even though they were unaware of the proximity of his camp, their present location at the exact spot where his recruits must leave the road, would prevent any additions reaching his forces. Thus far about four hundred men had joined him, raising his total to nearly a thousand, but he realized that at this rate of progress it would be weeks if not months before he could begin active operations. Then it would be too late. Already he had changed his plans to accord with this condition. He had now decided to wait until the troops of the king had all departed for the front. Then he would dash into the defenceless city and become its master. If Nabonidos was successful he would close the gates against him; if on the other hand Cyrus broke through the lines of the king, he would welcome the defeated army in Babylon and oppose the Persians, trusting to the height and strength of the massive walls to bring him success.

With this plan in mind he saw with interest and pleasure the long lines of marching men that were continually passing at his feet. Every body that passed his camp meant that many less troops remaining in the city. So completely was his camp sheltered by its surroundings that it was entirely hidden from the passing soldiers. But for Shemakin and his anticipated treachery, he would have felt comparatively secure. The continued presence of the encamped troops worried him. If they had merely pitched their camp for the night they would have

been in motion long since. He was beginning to connect them with Shemakin.

The past two days had not been idle ones in Sheshbazzar's camp. From early morning until sundown he had drilled his men, with results both gratifying and surprising. The men at once recognized their leader as a master in his profession and accorded him the respect and obedience that were his due: Under his skilful guidance they marched and rode like veterans, while the incessant archery practice made them experts. Had Nabonidos persisted in his intention of making this man the commander of his army and given him absolute control in all matters of drill, discipline and disposition the history of Asia might prove vastly different reading. But Nabonidos was the tool of Destiny. The hour had come for the final overthrow of the Semitic race and no man could have stemmed the Aryan tide.

Well indeed was this irksome but necessary drilling, for could Sheshbazzar have seen far enough into the distance, he would have beheld the flower of the king's cavalry hastening toward his camp. Even now as he stood leaning against a stately trunk, gazing thoughtfully into the distance, he saw a horseman approaching at a breakneck pace. Suddenly he disappeared. The prince remained watching for the reappearance of the rider. In a few moments he came galloping up the gentle slope toward the camp entrance. He had made a long detour through the fields, thus approaching the camp in such a way as to be unseen of the troops below. The prince recognized him at once. It was Iddin. Seeing his superior standing at the entrance, he dismounted and approached on foot.

"What news, Iddin?" inquired the prince.

"The worst possible. A force is under way to strengthen that yonder and they will attack our camp soon, possibly before night. Their orders are to bring thee back dead or alive."

"It will be dead if at all," said the prince sorrowfully.

"There is worse news still for thee, I fear," continued Iddin.

"Thy sweetheart has been abducted, by Belshazzar 'tis thought."

An expression of the deepest anguish slowly spread itself over the prince's dark, passionate countenance. He paled from dismay and anger. He received the first portion of Iddin's tidings with calm sorrow. Something of that nature had been expected, but to think of Orma as being in the power of the dissolute Belshazzar was maddening. His first impulse was to ride directly to Babylon and rescue her. He would face all his enemies combined rather than have harm befall one silken hair of her precious head. The expected attack forbade such knight-errantry. He must bear his pain and sorrow until the enemy was beaten.

He turned silently and led the way into camp. He passed directly to his own tent, followed closely by Iddin. When they were alone in the tent he demanded all the details of Orma's misfortune.

"I can give thee very little information, sir. All I know is this: Heber visited his home yesterday and found only his broken-hearted father. From him he learned of his sister's disappearance. She was summoned to the Hanging Gardens to meet the queen and has not since returned. Thou knowest, sir, what is located at the gardens. Inquiries at the palace revealed the message to be false. Nitocris denies sending it, and it is thought the message came from Belshazzar as she has mentioned her fear of him several times. Those are the facts, as far as known. The queen has promised to assist in discovering and rescuing her."

"Oh that I were in Babylon!" cried the prince in agonized tones. He was pacing excitedly up and down the tent.

"What can I do, Iddin? Must I stay here and fight for myself while she is dishonored?"

"It is a hard question, sir," replied the young man, genuinely sorrowful because of his friend's trouble, "but thou canst not go at this time. Thou wouldst ride alone straight in the arms of the men sent to take thee."

"True, true," said Sheshbazzar sorrowfully. "There is nothing for me to do but to stay here and defend mine own safety while her soul cries out to mine to come to her."

He paced back and forth, up and down, clenching and unclenching his hands in an agony of despair. All thoughts of conquest, of glory, of ambition were gone. His beloved needed him and he could not go to her. Iddin stood by deeply sympathizing with his friend and prince, but with his mind full of plans for resisting the forces that would surely attack the camp by the following morning and it was now nearly noon. At last he deemed it best to interrupt Sheshbazzar's mood.

"Hast thou any orders to give in regard to strengthening the camp?" he asked.

Thus called to himself the prince sat down and for a few moments concentrated his thought upon the subject Iddin suggested. In a short time he arose and outlined to his assistant a complete plan of defence. The two men at once left the tent to put their plan into operation. The remainder of the day was spent by all in strengthening the camp. The chief defense consisted in a bulwark completely surrounding the camp. This they erected by felling trees and piling the logs one upon another, using the limbs to form a rude abatis-like pile outside. Before retiring for the night a double line of sentries was placed completely around the camp. Spies who had been out since morning returned with the information that the cavalry had arrived and gone into camp beside the infantry.

Every man under Sheshbazzar's command was astir at sunrise the following morning. Breakfast was hastily dispatched and the final preparations for the defense began. All the available arrows were distributed to the archers, and they were sent to their places under strict injunctions not to shoot until the enemy was close at hand and then to make every arrow tell. Next the horsemen were armed with spears and sent to back the archers. The horses were corralled in the center of the camp and a few soldiers were left in charge of them.

Sheshbazzar, clad in complete battle array with a heavy

sword in his hand, walked back and forth inside the outer barricades enjoining his men to save their arrows and not shoot until the enemy was close upon them. He and he alone knew that every arrow they possessed was in the quivers of the men. On this account he exhorted his spearmen to stand firm.

All was in readiness to resist the expected attack. The scouts kept dropping in one by one, all bringing the same information; the enemy was forming his lines for the advance and was liable to start at any moment. They were evidently to attack in time honored fashion, in three columns precipitated at three different points. Sheshbazzar sent the word on to Iddin who commanded on the north and to Belmurda on the east. The defenders stood thus in their places ready for instant service for more than two hours while the attackers leisurely formed their lines. Sure of success they felt no need for haste. At length shortly before noon, the lookouts in the edge of the woods reported the columns to be in motion.

"They are coming," was the cry passed along the lines and sent by messengers to the other commanders.

Fretting and fuming the archers knelt behind their barricades, peering through the fallen trees to catch a glimpse of the enemy. On they came in solid formation, advancing slowly but in perfect order. They plunged through the canal keeping their ranks as on dress parade. The defenders could but admire the perfect order and discipline.

"Wait, wait," the officers of the camp were continually calling to their men.

On, on, came the advancing hosts. The archers behind the barricades had their long bronze-headed arrows in place; only a pull of the bowstring remained. Steadily the king's troops kept on. Moments passed, the defenders impatiently awaiting the moment of contact. Still the enemy marched forward. The prince noted with surprise that the troops opposing his own line consisted entirely of footmen. He judged that the cavalry would attack in another quarter. Not an arrow had yet been exchanged. Both sides were waiting for a desperate encounter

at short range. At last, when the advancing line had broken into squads to work their way through the trees, Sheshbazzar gave the order to shoot.

The bowstrings clanged and two hundred carefully aimed arrows flew into the ranks of the king's troops, a deadly shower. Men fell in the foremost ranks. Their companions, many of them wounded, hesitated a moment. Their return fire was scattering and of little effect. While they faltered a second volley was sent into them. The first line broke and fell back upon the second, which in turn broke and before the officers could restrain them, the entire body was in full retreat, followed by showers of arrows from the elated archers of Sheshbazzar. For the moment the victory was with the forces of the prince.

The battle was not yet over. By the time the retreating forces reached the level plain beyond the swamp the officers succeeded in controlling them and the men silently, shamefacedly turned about to take their places in the ranks. An hour later the reformed columns began their second advance upon the camp. As before the defenders withheld their arrows until the advancing enemy was close at hand. Then a shower of well aimed missiles spread death and dismay among the attackers. The target practice was showing its value. Again the enemy hesitated but spurred on by the officers, themselves towers of might, they plunged forward into the showers of death-dealing arrows. On through the woods they came, a broken zigzagging line. They stumbled over roots and stones only to rise and rush forward again. Almost to the barricade they came, but at a soft word of command from the prince, the defending archers arose from their knees and sent a single well directed volley into the very faces of their opponents, receiving in return a scattering fire that worked little harm. Every arrow in that flight had been aimed at an individual target and the result was more than the nerves of the king's soldiers could withstand. A second time they faltered and to falter so near their opponents meant death. Another volley

from the prince's archers sent them backward and in another moment they broke and fled precipitately. Sheshbazzar's men were eager to give chase but their leader restrained them. Defensive warfare he felt to be his only salvation, protected as were his men by the barricades.

The second rout of the attacking force was so complete that the prince judged he would have a considerable breathing spell before again being attacked. Therefore, after ordering out details of his men to attend the enemy's wounded, he left his own post to visit the other sides of the camp and see how matters fared with his assistants. He had hardly left the barricade when he met messengers from Iddin and Belmurda asking for assistance, if the men could be spared.

The prince placed himself at the head of a company of spearmen and hastened across the camp toward the barricade defended by Iddin. On the way he passed the reserves under Nebogurza drawn up in line ready to reinforce whoever needed them. These he ordered to the support of Belmurda. He found Iddin hard pressed. The forest directly in front of this barricade was so dense that the archers of Iddin had been unable to inflict any damage upon the king's troops until they were directly before them. Before they could stay the advance of the regulars they had leaped upon the parapet of the barricade. A desperate hand-to-hand conflict ensued, in the midst of which Iddin, seeing his men gradually giving ground to the invaders, sent for help.

The added strength of an hundred fresh men and the example of Sheshbazzar's personal valor turned the tide of defeat at the supreme moment of the encounter. The prince sprang into the midst of the conflict and wielded his great sword with superhuman strength. Right and left and back and forth it flashed, bearing all before it. When the king's troops gave way before the terrible onslaught, Sheshbazzar and his men leaped over the fortifications and pressed the attackers slowly backward until they were without the belt of woods. The battle among the trees was terrific while it lasted. It was every man for him-

self and the slaughter was frightful. At length the scattered remains of the well trained band of soldiery composing the attacking column withdrew in fairly good order, leaving their dead and wounded comrades behind them. The defenders had also lost heavily and the prince sighed as the battle-scarred remnant of his force gathered about him.

In the meantime disaster had fallen upon Belmurda and Nebogurza. The enemy was completely victorious upon that side of the camp and captured many prisoners beside a large proportion of the prince's stores and horses. Upon hearing of this disaster Sheshbazzar and Iddin hurried across the camp with their little band to attack the successful column, but it was too late. While his men at the western side of the enclosure were engaged in caring for the wounded the cavalry made a sudden dash, overrode the force at the gateway and entered the camp. They were in absolute control of the entire southern and western sides of the enclosure.

The survivors of Sheshbazzar's force gathered near the center of the camp, behind a row of tents, a pitiable remnant of the band that had twice sent the flower of Babylon's army rushing pell-mell down the slope. A hasty consultation was held. The prince realized himself completely defeated and was striving to think of some means to save the brave fellows who had that day fought for him so gallantly.

"I have a plan, sir, but there is not time for me to outline it," said Iddin. "Wilt thou give me command over all, including thyself, for the next few moments?"

"If in thy judgment thy plan will succeed I stand ready to obey thy orders," said the prince.

Notwithstanding the gravity of the moment Iddin ordered his chief around in a playful manner. Acting under these orders Sheshbazzar removed the costly clothing Cyrus had given him and in its place donned that of a private soldier, Iddin meanwhile assuming the vestments his leader threw off. In a moment the rab mag's son stood attired as a prince.

"Prince," he said, turning to Sheshbazzar, "thine is the life

which must be saved. There is yet time for thee to seek shelter in the woods. I and all the men that remain to us will make a dash for liberty."

Leading his chief to one side the young man whispered in his ear: "Farewell, my prince. May the gods keep thee out of the hands of thine enemies. Twice hast thou doubted me; doubt me not this time."

"Nay, Iddin, thou hast proven thy faithfulness today. Defeated though I am now, there may yet come a time when success will crown my efforts. Then I shall not forget thy devotion."

A soldier came leading Saru. Iddin leaped upon the back of his commander's favorite.

"Farewell, prince," he cried.

He rode to the head of the little band who were mounted for the dash. He gave the word to start. Sheshbazzar watched them as they departed upon their mad venture. Then with a sad heart he turned and walked slowly away. He vaulted the barricade and hurried on to the woods. Once hidden amid the undergrowth he paused and looked about him. Close at hand was a tall poplar whose top lifted itself high above the surrounding trees. Slowly and laboriously he worked his way up the trunk and then branch by branch until he reached a position from which he could command a view of the surrounding country.

He saw his faithful friend emerge from the gateway followed closely by the others. They were rushing at a mad gallop. Close behind them rode a body of cavalry in hot pursuit. Down through the swamp they rushed, Iddin well in advance, placed there by Saru's long strides. As they turned toward the south the observer saw a body of cavalry, which up to this time had been standing in reserve, start off in a diagonal direction to head off the little band. Iddin swerved suddenly to the left to escape this new force, and as he did so dashed almost into the arms of a company of archers and spearmen who seemed to rise from the ground by magic. Sheshbazzar felt rather than

saw the volley of arrows that was hurled at his friends, but he could see Iddin waver in his saddle a moment and then fall, Saru keeping on his mad career.

"Ah, Iddin," murmured the prince, his voice choked with emotion, "thou hast indeed proven thy faithfulness."

Could he have been present at the fatal spot further proof of the young man's devotion would have been shown him. He would have heard the officer who caught the falling hero, cry in his ear: "Where is Sheshbazzar?" and he would have heard the pale lips of the dying man murmur, "I—I am Sheshbazzar."

CHAPTER XXXV

A DEFIANCE AND A PROPHECY

Early the following morning an officer presented himself at the royal palace in Babylon and demanded instant audience with the king. The servants had received orders concerning him and consequently admitted him to the royal presence immediately. Both monarchs greeted him most cordially.

"Well Nergalmakin, what news bringest thou?" asked Nabonidos.

"News of the best, O King," replied the soldier.

"Make thy report," commanded the monarch.

"We attacked the camp of the rebels at noon yesterday and after a terrible battle lasting more than three hours we gained their camp and all it contained."

"Including Sheshbazzar?" cried Vulmaran who was present as usual.

"I am coming to that presently," replied the officer with some dignity.

"When we thought we were in complete control of the camp and began our search for the chief rebel we were surprised to see him dash from behind a group of huts followed by fifty or more of his men. So completely had this move surprised us

that he had left the camp before we could prevent him. I ordered a body of horsemen in instant pursuit and as soon as the escaping enemy was seen our reserves started to head him off. In turning to escape the reserves he ran into a body of footmen who made short work of the band, the horsemen arriving in time to assist. Not a man of them escaped. There is but one incident to regret. The man we were sent to capture was killed by an arrow but before he died he acknowledged himself to be Sheshbazzar."

"Thy news is welcome," said Nabonidos. "Thou hast done well and as a reward we appoint thee to command the last division of our army which leaves at daybreak tomorrow for Sippara."

The newly-made general bowed low out of gratitude for his great promotion. He still remained to receive such orders as the king had for him.

"What didst thou with the body of this man?" asked Vulmaran.

"We brought it with us under guard," answered the officer.

"Bid it be brought here immediately," commanded the king. "I long to look upon that face and realize that this nightmare which has haunted me all my life is at last over. Sheshbazzar dead! Ha, my son, now thou canst rule in peace. Who can now arise to claim thy throne? The line of Nebuchadnezzar is at last extinct. What joy this news will bring to thy mother, Belshazzar."

Belshazzar sat moody and depressed. Now that his rival was really out of the way, he felt little joy. The king business was not as pleasant as he had pictured it. Then too, his lack of success in wooing the caged Jewess made him morose.

"Father," he cried as he saw four soldiers enter carrying a ghastly burden, "I will retire. I cannot look upon the face of this man. I once loved him as my teacher."

The elder monarch frowned but said nothing and Belshazzar left the room by a private door.

The soldiers advanced slowly across the apartment and at

last placed their burden at the king's feet. The body rested upon a rude litter and was hidden from view by a robe.

"Remove that covering that I may gaze upon the face of mine enemy," commanded the king.

The robe was pulled down revealing the form of Iddin clad in the attire of Sheshbazzar. As the features were uncovered a piercing shriek burst from Vulmaran and he tottered backwards.

"Oh, Merodach," he cried, "it is my son, my son."

"Ye fools," cried the king, "yonder body is not that of Sheshbazzar. Take that beggar away and throw him into the river."

"Beggar indeed," cried Vulmaran, facing the king defiantly. "I tell thee yonder body is my son, Iddin."

"Is this my reward?" he continued. "Is this the return I get for my years of faithful service, for the crimes I have committed at thy instigation. To hear my only son called a beggar and his body consigned to the river.

"I have served thee long and well, King Nabonidos. I made thee king and my brains alone have kept thee on thy throne. One word from me and this prince who has again escaped thee would at this moment be seated upon thy throne. My services with thee are over, O King. I leave to join some enemy of thine, I care not who. I shall seek out the brave young prince and assist him in winning the throne that by law is his, but I fear it is too late. The Persian will have thee by the throat ere the month of Tammuz is past.

"King Nabonidos, thou art a fool, a doting fool and thy son is a lustful imbecile. Dame Babylon, thou art indeed to be pitied with two such kings to govern thee. One were bad enough, Bel knows; but two! What damage the one cannot do the other will.

"Cursed be me that ever for one moment I opposed this noble young man who by all the laws should be our king. Ah, Babylon, had Vulmaran loved thee more and himself less how different might be thy future. Unborn generations shall curse Nabonidos and execrate Belshazzar but they will not spare Vul-

maran. He is more responsible. He had the power to place thy rightful sovereign upon the throne and give thee new life. Too late! Too late! Thou must become the unwilling mistress of the barbarian. Thy gilded halls shall be thronged with leathern-breeched men, thy——”

“Who is it thus prophesies?” inquired a low but heavy voice.

Both Vulmaran and the king turned toward the speaker. They beheld a man not unknown to both. The newcomer was Daniel, the Hebrew prophet.

“Thy words are sound, Vulmaran,” he continued. “Who can say this proud city deservest not the doom God hath in store for her?”

“I am come to see thee, O King,” he said, turning to the monarch, “upon a matter of the greatest importance. A Jewish maiden, the daughter of a princely line has been lured from her home by means of a false message from thy queen and is kept a prisoner. It is believed thine own son is the man guilty of the crime. I am come to beg thee to restore the maiden to her kindred and set thy son aright that he commit not his soul to perdition.”

“Daniel,” said the king sternly, “were it not for the great respect all men have for thee I would order thee into our dungeons for bringing such an accusation against our son and thy king. ’Twere beneath me to interfere in such matters. All I would reproach him for would be his choice. With all the fair of Babylon to choose from, why should he seek a Jewess? Supposing however his tastes fall in that direction, what have I to do with so trivial a matter as a Jewess maiden’s virtue? Better for her to lose it to a king than to a slave of her own race.”

The stern features of the great prophet grew dark as he listened to these careless words. In tones calm and dispassionate yet full of the deepest displeasure, he made answer.

“Thine own tongue does thee a wrong, King Nabonidos. The virtue of a Jewish maiden is dearer to her than life itself, and she will sacrifice her life rather than lose it. Thou canst

ill afford, O King, in this dark hour of thy nation's history to countenance such an act. In the name of my God, Jehovah of the Hebrews, I demand that this maiden be restored unstained to her friends."

"Peace, worthy Daniel. I may have erred in my speech, but never have I seen so much stir made over a woman's honor. Thrice has my queen sought my couch and into my waking ears poured such a storm as I have not heard before these many years. I will question Belshazzar but remember, if he give not up the maid of his own will I shall not press him. He is the king and is answerable to none."

"King Nabonidos," answered the man of God, "thy son, yea and thyself also, are answerable to one whose mighty will shall be seen ere many suns gild yonder temple summit. Listen, King. Last night the Lord showed unto his servant, Daniel, a vision and made known unto him the interpretation thereof. I looked and behold a horseman came out of the north. I looked upon his face and saw it pale, pale as one who is dead, but as I gazed upon him I saw the flush of life creep into his cheeks. I saw his lips move and I listened unto the words that he spake and they were words of doom unto this city.

"Now listen, O King, while I unfold unto thee the meaning of this dream. The pale horseman is a messenger who shall come to thee from the north. His face being pale unto death denotes him as one coming from the grave; the blush of life mounting into his cheeks shows the one supposedly dead returning unto life. The words he spake signify the message he will bring.

"Should such a messenger come unto thee, O King, I warn thee, do him no injury. Let him depart as he came or receive him as an honored guest and thy life shall be spared."

During Daniel's brief narrative of his dream and the interpretation thereof Nabonidos sat quietly gazing into the prophet's face. The countenance of the king was pale, his hands clasped tightly the miniature lion heads that adorned the arms

of his throne. His whole attitude showed the deep impression the prophet's words were making. As Daniel finished speaking the king answered him.

"Thou art indeed a wonderful man, O Daniel, for know that the vision thou sawest was seen by me also and much has it troubled me since. I give thee my word should such a strange messenger as we have seen in our dreams come unto me I will receive him as my guest.

"As to this girl," he continued, "I pledge myself she shall be returned to her friends."

Daniel bowed a silent acknowledgment of the monarch's promise and turned to depart. As he turned his eye fell upon the corpse of Iddin which lay where the soldiers had placed it. The grief stricken father knelt beside the litter, his lips pressed against his son's cold hand.

"Ah, Vulmaran," said the prophet, placing one hand upon the kneeling man's shoulder, "mourn not for this, thy son. His eyes shall not witness the terrible scenes that are coming. Thou shalt see them but only for a moment."

Without another word Daniel left the room. When he had gone, Vulmaran arose and again faced the king to continue his tirade. The king turned to the soldier who had been a silent witness of the interesting scene just closed. "Nergalmakin, it is evident a mistake has been made. This body is not that of Sheshbazzar," he said.

"So it appears but King Nabonidos, I am convinced that the rebellious prince is dead. We made strict search throughout the camp and surroundings, and I am sure not a man escaped us. If Prince Sheshbazzar was in the camp he is dead."

"May the gods so grant. I am inclined to think he was killed early in the engagement and this man Iddin impersonated him in order to continue the rebellion," said the king.

Again Vulmaran turned to berate the king but the monarch forestalled him.

"Spare me, Vulmaran. Take the body of thy son and give it

decent burial. I regret this mistake but thou must remember he lost his life while fighting against his country," said Nabonidos, not unkindly.

"Not against his country, but against the usurper of his country's throne," cried the half crazed rab mag.

"Say no more," commanded the king, "thou wouldst have slain me as thou slewest Laborosoarchod couldst thou have won my throne thereby. Go I command thee while I am in a lenient mood. Stay not until the spell caused by yonder mysterious man's wonderful words shall have left me, for then I may order thee into custody for thy words of treason. Go, Sheshbazzar is dead and I therefore give thee thy life, but go at once."

The rab mag motioned to the soldiers to take up the litter. As they approached he tenderly covered his son's face with the robe. At the threshold he turned and called loudly: "May the curses of the gods rest upon thee and thy crazy son, King Nabonidos."

When at last the king found himself alone he arose and paced up and down the apartment, absorbed in deep thought. The vision seen by both Daniel and himself had made a deep impression upon him and added to this was the supposed death of Sheshbazzar which Nabonidos believed an assured fact, notwithstanding that it was not the prince's body which had been so carefully brought to Babylon.

"Ah, Prince Sheshbazzar," he cried, "has this mad business indeed cost thy country its greatest soldier and thy king the only honest man upon whom he could lean? Tyrant and usurper thou hast called me, but thou little knowest how true a friend I have been to thee all through."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE MESSENGER

At five o'clock in the morning of the tenth day of June, B.C., 538, a horseman, mounted upon a superb black horse, was galloping toward Babylon with all the speed his noble beast could put forth. The animal's flanks and sides were flecked with foam, his nostrils were dilated and his eyes had a wild look, but he sped onward in long regular strides. His rider was dressed as a soldier but was entirely without arms. He wore no helmet, his long black hair streaming in the wind, a wavy cloud. He sat immovable, one hand upon the horse's mane and he leaned far over on the animal's neck to minimize the resistance to the wind.

Just before reaching the great outer gate of the city the flying horseman sat upright and waved his right arm aloft as a signal to the soldier on guard to open the gate for him. His every appearance so denoted an errand of the utmost importance that none thought of stopping him for the required pass. The great brazen gates swung open just as the messenger galloped over the drawbridge. He passed the half awake sentries with a whirl. Straight on through the city he dashed, the horse in agony but still holding to his task, until the outer wall of the king's palace was reached. Here he drew rein and dismounted. Hardly had his feet touched the pavement when his noble steed uttered a low groan, fell to the ground and in a moment was dead. The rider gave his faithful friend a long loving look and then hurried on to the gate.

"A message for the king," was all the pass he used, but it was sufficient. The three gates were opened for him in succession and he rushed on to the palace entrance.

"Call the king. I have a message," he panted.

Servants ran to the royal apartments and in a few moments

Nabonidos appeared followed by Belshazzar, both attired in their night robes.

"Thou hast a message?" asked the king.

"The Persians have broken through our lines in Accad and are marching on Sippara," cried the messenger.

"By Merodach!" exclaimed the elder monarch. A moment later Belshazzar, white and trembling, cried out: "Father, father, gaze on that man."

The messenger was Sheshbazzar and the horse that gave his life for Babylon was Saru.

"Ha!" said Nabonidos, "is it thou at last?"

"Yea, O King, it is I, but this is no time for private quarrels. Reinforcements must be hurried forward or all is lost. I have opposed thee but now I am with thee to resist the common foe."

"Then thy cause is forever lost?" said the king smiling.

"Nay, King Nabonidos," was the reply. "I admit myself beaten for the time being but I cannot give up all hope for the future. However that may be I am here this morning to offer thee my sword in defence of our common land. The quarrel between thee and me must not injure our country. Rather would I give up all my rights than see my beloved Babylon fall into the hands of the invader, noble enemy though he be."

"Nobly spoken, Sheshbazzar," said the monarch magnanimously, extending his hand to his late foe. "I too will forget the past."

"Come," he continued, "enter again these halls where thou wert once so welcome. Fear naught at my hands but let us in the future sink all our differences in the common love for our country. Let our only strife be the friendly one of seeing who can best serve our mistress, Babylon. I must leave thee now while I change this scant attire for that befitting my rank, even though thou questionest my right to that rank." This last was said in pleasantry.

Sheshbazzar doubted not the monarch's sincerity. His own noble mind could put aside all personal considerations in the

hour of his nation's peril, and he gave Nabonidos credit for the same feelings. Nor was his trust misplaced. Nabonidos, ever a slave to his passing whims, one moment cruel and revengeful, the next indulgent, had decided upon his present course of action the moment he recognized the messenger. The words of Daniel, coupled with his natural liking for the brave young soldier, had influenced him in making this decision. Thus with never a fear as to his future safety the lawful king followed the reigning one into the great reception room. Here he was left alone while Nabonidos and Belshazzar retired to their private apartments.

While Sheshbazzar sat alone in the spacious throne room his mind was active and Orma was its theme. He rapidly considered several plans of rescue that suggested themselves to him. First he must ascertain the location of her prison. Remembering the small size of the villa in the Hanging Gardens he doubted not her being confined there. He almost decided to question Belshazzar, trusting to the power which a strong mind exerts over a weak one to cause the boy king to divulge the information. At this moment a voice beside him aroused him from his thoughts.

"Sir, I would speak with thee," it said.

The prince turned quickly to see the speaker. The man's attire betokened him a servant of the royal establishment, one of that army whose keeping was always so severe a drain upon the king's revenues. Ninabeth, the overworked financier whose genius supplied Nabonidos with his income, once remarked that between the king's household, his harem and his immense stud, the revenues of the empire were scarcely sufficient to support the royal establishment alone. Small wonder then that the army went unpaid aside from what booty they could obtain, but even this usual source of income for the soldiers had been cut off during the present reign, as Nabonidos had made no new conquests.

The servant was unknown to Sheshbazzar and he must have seen this, to judge from his next remark.

"Thou knowest me not but I know thee. Thou art Prince Sheshbazzar."

"Thou art right; but what is it thou hast to say?"

"I can tell thee where is one whose whereabouts thou wishest to know."

"What meanest thou?" asked the prince, starting.

"I speak of the Jewish maiden who is held captive by Belshazzar," answered the servant.

Sheshbazzar sprang to his feet.

"Tell me," he cried excitedly, "where is her prison? Are there bars mine arms cannot break to rescue her?"

"Hush, sir," said the servant, "one must be careful of one's speech within these walls. She whom thou wouldst seek is in the villa upon the topmost stage of the Hanging Gardens. Enter at the front and thou wilt find her in the fourth room upon the right of the hall."

"Accept my deepest thanks. I hope some day I will be able to reward thee as thou deservest," said the prince.

"Reward is not my desire," replied the servant with an air of injured pride.

"What then prompted thine action?"

"The desire which every honest man should have of undoing a wrong act. Against my will I was forced to assist in her abduction and I therefore wish to do my part toward rescuing her. If I am needed sir, I will accompany thee to the Gardens and assist thee further."

"Thou art a good fellow," said the prince, "but I would not endanger thee by accepting thy services. Thou hast done thy part; be mine the task of rescue."

The servant deemed the interview closed and hastily left the room. He had hardly disappeared through the main doorway when Nabonidos entered from the side. Belshazzar, having no desire to meet the prince, had not returned.

"Thou hast had no breakfast this morning, Nabomuran. Come and share our family repast," said the king.

Sheshbazzar paid no heed to the covert insult contained in

the speech of Nabonidos. He charged his being called by his former name to absentmindedness rather than intention. He was hungry and gladly followed the king into the private dining room.

Nabonidos was right in terming this a family repast, for already seated about the table were Nitocris, Halista and Belshazzar.

"Queen, thy son; Halista and Belshazzar, thy brother," said the king in high glee over the surprise he was giving his wife and step-daughter.

The prince greeted the queen and the princess affectionately but withheld all courtesies from Belshazzar. The youth indeed arose to greet him but the prince silenced him at once.

"There is a wrong between us, Belshazzar, that no fine words can help," he said.

The boy skulked back upon his seat without a word. All present knew of the wrong to which their guest referred. Nabonidos, determined that nothing should mar the pleasure of this reunion but that all differences should be put out of sight, hastened to step into the breach opened by Sheshbazzar's speech.

"We know whereof thou speakest, Nabomuran," he said, "and hope to set matters aright. This unfortunate affair shall be settled to the satisfaction of all."

The prince made no reply. He had little confidence in anything being done by the king and the slave's information would enable him to rescue Orma himself. He therefore saw no object in keeping the matter open.

For all save Belshazzar the meal was a pleasant one. He partook of his fare in sullen silence and long before the other members of the party finished eating he arose and left the room. The others ate and chatted in the freest possible manner. No stranger would have imagined that three days before one member of this happy group had sent an armed force against another with orders to take him dead or alive. To the ladies present the meal was the happiest they had known for months.

Nabonidos, knowing his wife and daughter to be upon the side of the pretender had bestowed little courtesy upon them. Of recent events in the prince's life he had kept them in ignorance. To them this sight of the rebellious prince alive and well and on terms of amity with the king against whom he had waged war, bordered on the miraculous. Yet the pleasure was not without its attendant sorrow, for in the prince's presence, they read the total failure of his cause.

To the prince himself it all seemed a dream, or rather the events of the past year seemed a dream and he felt as if nothing had ever come between him and his monarch. Gradually a different feeling toward his recently hated enemy was taking possession of his mind. His long acquaintance with Nabonidos made him aware of the monarch's instability but in his present treatment he saw something deeper than a mere passing whim. Thoroughly conversant with the many moods of the king he had never yet known him to show so sudden a revulsion of feeling towards one who had opposed him.

As soon after the meal as courtesy allowed Sheshbazzar excused himself on the plea of visiting his foster-father, Neboakhu. He also requested the king to loan him a horse from the royal stables, explaining as an excuse how his own faithful steed had given his life for Babylon. Nabonidos himself led the way to the royal stables and called for a certain horse. The prince as a born horseman gazed with unfeigned admiration upon the spirited mare which a groom led forth. His surprise was great when the king begged him to accept the animal as a token of his monarch's fullest forgiveness for all that was past and as a slight payment for the noble animal he had sacrificed in order to deliver the message.

"Forgiveness!" exclaimed the prince. "Am I to understand then that my cause is wholly lost and I am received back to my former allegiance?"

"Listen to me, Nabomuran, but no, I will call thee by the name thou art entitled to wear, Sheshbazzar. Think of thy present position. Thou art entirely within my power, I, the

king against whom thou hast rebelled and the king, I may add, who once condemned thee to death. Could I foresee the least likelihood of thy being able to gather about thee followers enough to make thee dangerous I would order thee into prison at once. I consider thy defeat final and therefore have I received thee into my family as an honored son, for remember, Prince, the ties of marriage make me thy father. Why wilt thou continue in thy mad attempt to gain a throne which I assure thee is the hardest one ever man occupied. Rather then, stay in my family and receive at my hands honors I have planned for thee. At daybreak tomorrow I start for Sippara to make amends, if it be not too late, for my previous tardiness. I have intended taking command of the army myself, but if thou wilt forego thy desires for kingship, thou shalt lead Babylon's army against her foes. More also have I in mind for thee. When we have beaten off the invader and settle down again into peaceful ways thou shalt be rab mag of Babylon. Here are two pathways open before thee. The one is beset with hardships and pitfalls and ends in a rebel's death; the other is one of ease and comfort and leads to honor. Which wilt thou choose?"

Sheshbazzar stood with one hand upon the bridle of the noble steed the magnanimous monarch had bestowed upon him. His head was bent, his eyes downcast and in his mind a severe struggle was taking place. He reviewed the events so recently passed and attempted to find in them some guidance for his future action. He too considered his cause forever lost. The results of Iddin's recruiting had been a great disappointment for he had expected whole regiments to flock around his standard once it was raised. The comparative ease with which the troops of the king had annihilated his force was a bitter discouragement. The morning following the battle, after the king's troops had withdrawn from the vicinity carrying their prisoners with them, he left his hiding place and wandered away from the spot, alone, disheartened. He sat down upon the steps of the ruined tomb and remained there during the greater

part of the day. Late in the afternoon he noticed a loose horse and to his surprise recognized it as Saru. He gave a low whistle and the faithful animal came to him.

Early in the evening, while it was yet light, he saw a horseman approaching at a terrible pace. When almost before the tomb the weary horse stumbled, fell and threw his rider far over his head. Sheshbazzar hastened to the man's assistance but he refused all aid. He declared his leg to be broken but said, as the road was much frequented, some passer-by would surely find him. He then requested the prince to carry to the king the message of defeat.

With never a question as to his own fate, Sheshbazzar accepted the trust. At the moment he climbed upon Saru's back to begin his all night ride he felt that he renounced all claims to royalty. For Babylon's sake he risked all, fully expecting that imprisonment and death would be his reward. Yet here was the king offering him honors second only to his own. He could not decide upon an answer. He felt too that the sacrifices of his friends would be wasted. When he did decide it was his love of country, his desire to aid her in her dark hour, that caused the decision.

"Come," urged Nabonidos, "what sayest thou?"

"I am entirely unprepared for such an offer from thee, O King," he replied. "When I brought this message unto thee I fully believed I was surrendering myself. To have such generosity shown me has unnerved me. I cannot at this moment choose between the paths. I will go with thee and do all that lies in my power to assist in defeating our common enemy. As to the rest of thy generous offer, I need not decide until peace is won."

"Very true," replied the king. "I will consider it settled then, thou art to command at Sippara."

"As the king wills," was the reply.

"Then return to the palace as soon as possible. There is much to be done and much to consider before night if we are to leave at daybreak."

CHAPTER XXXVII

ORMA'S FELLOW PRISONER

Sheshbazzar rode out through the palace gates and turned his horse's head toward the temple. He noticed as he passed the outermost gates that the body of Saru had already been removed. He looked forward with pleasure to his meeting with the old man who for so great a portion of his life had been as a father to him. Not since the coronation day of Belshazzar had he seen the old priest and only the briefest news of him had he received. Aside from the messages received through Iddin no word had come from him. As he rode out through the palace grounds this invigorating June morning his mood was a joyful one. Disappointment always rests lightly upon the head of youth; nature has so decreed it and it is well. Lost ambition must needs leave its scars behind, even upon youth, but Sheshbazzar was of an optimistic temperament. However thoughts of what might have been detracted considerably from the joy he felt at being again in his beloved Babylon, free to come and go as he wished.

As he passed the stately residence of Vulmaran that individual was just leaving it. Sheshbazzar reined in his steed to greet the former official. Notwithstanding the injuries received at the man's hands the prince could not forget whose father he was, that he was now mourning for an only son. As he remembered the heroism of the dead youth his noble heart put away forever all feelings of enmity for the sorrowing father. It was some moments before the former courtier recognized the plainly attired soldier who approached him. When he did so a smile illuminated his usually stolid face and he hurried to meet the young man.

"Ah, Sheshbazzar, thou art arrived at a sorrowful time," he said as they met. "Today all that remains of my once gay son is to be buried with his ancestors in our ancient tomb."

"Alas," said the prince sadly, "poor Iddin gave his life for a hopeless cause."

"Ah yes, Prince, but he is spared the sight of his nation's downfall. Tell me, did he bear himself well in thy service?"

The prince narrated the incidents connected with his overwhelming defeat. He spoke sadly and as he told of Iddin's heroic death, his voice was choked with emotion.

"Alas! alas!" muttered the former rab mag. "I urged the sending of that force, little thinking of the sorrow I was causing myself thereby. I am repaid. I deserve it all as a punishment for the blind allegiance I gave yonder tyrant. Would that Iddin's father had been with thee, Prince. Ah, Sheshbazzar, thou shouldst have accepted the offer I once made thee. With the help I could have brought to thee thou wouldst today be King of Babylon."

The prince shook his head but said nothing.

"What services shalt thou have at Iddin's burial?" asked the prince a moment later.

"That is a matter which perplexes me. My son once told me he had embraced the religion of the Hebrews. He would therefore wish to be buried according to their rites."

"Iddin told me of his religious views also," said the prince.

"What services have these Hebrews?"

"That I know not, but I doubt if they differ much from our own."

"After all, Prince, what is there to do but put our loved ones in the tomb and there let them rot?"

"An ignoble thought, Vulmaran," replied the prince. "To me it seems as though there must be a hereafter, something beyond the tomb. The good are not rewarded nor the bad punished in this world. Justice alone demands another life where all shall receive their just deserts. At least a home in a cold tomb is little to look forward to."

"True," answered Vulmaran. "It would be pleasant to look forward to an everlasting life in a land where all is peace and quiet. For my part, Sheshbazzar, if there exists such a place I

am willing to leave this present life and all it contains to seek that mysterious land the Medes believe in."

"Nevertheless this is a grand old world, Vulmaran, and contains much worth living for," answered the prince.

"Not for me," said the former rab mag, sadly, "I have lost my son and mine office at the same time. I am ruined financially and politically and I fear I must seek a home elsewhere. Nabonidos dare do me no harm openly but I fear a stab in the dark."

"For my part I have a higher opinion of the king than I once held," said Sheshbazzar, his mind still filled with the morning's events.

"I trust him not. Remember, Sheshbazzar, I have served him, have known of his every act, have been an accomplice in many of his crimes. I know the man and I know his methods. Therefore I say unto thee I fear his vengeance. Such words as I yesterday spoke unto him will not go unpunished. But thyself! How comes it thou art thus boldly traversing these streets in thy true character? Knowest thou not, there is a price upon thy head? Why two days since I would have betrayed thee myself, such was the blind allegiance I gave yonder tyrant. Art thou not in danger?"

In a few words Sheshbazzar outlined his present standing with the king.

"Ah, friend, be not deceived. Believe me, behind that fair face and those pleasant words there lurks the greatest villain yet unslain. Remember this: Nabonidos takes not back into his good graces those who once lost them."

"He seemeth most sincere."

"I doubt not he seemeth so, but as soon trust thy wife in the temple of Beltis as trust this king. Remember, I have warned thee. If after my words thou feelest the sting of yonder viper, thou hast only thyself to blame."

"I share not thy opinion, Vulmaran, but nevertheless I thank thee for thy warning.

Without another word he turned and sprang into the saddle.

"Better far to trust Nabonidos than this villain. Ah, Iddin, thou must have had a noble mother whose blood offset thy father's, or thy religion must have a wonderful power to change men," he murmured as he rode away.

"Ha, Nabonidos, to spite me thou takest back this young upstart and heapest honors upon him. Vulmaran is not dead, however, nor yet asleep. Thou mayest hear from him yet," murmured Vulmaran.

Sheshbazzar continued his journey without further interruption and reached his old home just as Neboakhu returned from the morning sacrifice. The meeting between the two men was an affecting one. The old priest shed tears of joy at again beholding the young man he had brought up as his own son. Together they passed into the house, a servant taking possession of the prince's horse. The old man shook his head as the younger one told of the king's actions but said nothing to show that he felt any doubts as to the monarch's sincerity. Pleasant as was his visit in his old home Sheshbazzar did not allow himself to forget the work he had laid out for the morning. After a brief conversation with the priest he asked for the chariot, and in a few moments the vehicle was at the door, driven as usual by the ever-faithful Susa. Sheshbazzar bade the old man farewell, after telling him of the adventure he was about to undertake. A moment later he was in the vehicle that had so oft before carried him through the streets of the Golden City.

Immediately after the chariot came to a stop at the entrance to the Hanging Gardens he alighted. He stopped only to order Susa to remain until he returned; adding, if he did not return within a reasonable time the driver should consider some harm had befallen him and procure assistance. These injunctions Susa promised to obey faithfully. The prince then began his long climb to the top of Nebuchadnezzar's stately pile. He was not apprehensive of danger, but to guard against

the unexpected he carried a pair of handsome daggers (part of the equipment furnished him by King Cyrus) slipped inside his girdle. He had no eyes for the beauties of the fairyland about him but thought only of his destination and the object of his visit there. He hurried through the garden, from one flight of steps to another and on up until he reached the villa. He stood still a moment taking a swift inventory of his surroundings and endeavoring to see the scene enacted here a few days before.

In his mind's eye he could see the queen of his heart, for whom he had destined the proud place of queen of Babylon, carried bound and helpless into yonder villa, the unwilling captive of a boy libertine. The thought was maddening. A hot flush of angry passion mantled his swarthy cheek. Had Belshazzar been present at that moment a murder might have taken place, but the prince's good angel prevented such an encounter. Ah, Sheshbazzar, a higher power than thine rights the wrongs of this world and ere many days have passed, that power will avenge this deed. Far better that thy hands remain innocent of the blood of thy mother's son.

Only a moment did the prince hesitate before the villa. There was no hesitation in his character; once determined upon a course of action he carried it through without a question. He was here to rescue his beloved from her imprisonment and he would accomplish that for which he had come. In his own mind there existed no doubt as to Orma's fate. Never for an instant did he doubt her being dishonored, but not for a second did he think of her as aught but his own pure love. Whether Belshazzar had been successful or not in his vile plot, the love of Sheshbazzar did not waver. Honored or dishonored she should become his wife.

He hurried up the steps to the villa and boldly entered. He thought of the directions given him by the servant and passed down the corridor, counting the doors as he went along. At the fourth door on the right he stopped. Had he received no directions whatever he would have picked out this as the door

of Orma's prison since it was the only one fastened upon the outside. He hastily undid the heavy fastenings and threw back the bolt. He hesitated a moment from feelings of delicacy. While it was his loved one's prison it was also her chamber. He pushed the door open slightly and again waited. Through the narrow opening he could see Orma standing as we have already seen her, in the corner as if awaiting an enemy. He could not wait longer but pushed the door wide open and sprang in.

"Orma, my love!" he cried.

"My prince!" she said, advancing to meet him.

He opened his arms and clasped her to his bosom, at the same moment kissing her full upon her arching lips. It was a moment of unalloyed joy for both, the first real outburst of their affections. Before the full tide of their affection all remembrances of Nehum's objections were washed away. Come what might, henceforth they belonged to each other. Orma for the moment forgot even the religious barrier between them. He loved her and she him; what else was needed? The conviction came to both that from that moment no power on earth could separate them. All that remained was the overcoming of minor difficulties.

While they were thus absorbed in each other's love, they failed to see the figure of a man glide up to the door, tiptoe into the room and softly pull the door shut. Only as the bolts were shot into place Sheshbazzar heard the click and turned to learn the cause. As he beheld the door barred upon them he turned again to Orma his face white and drawn. He looked at her in consternation. No fear for himself could cause such despair. He thought only of Orma and of the position she was innocently placed in. An act of his had compromised the one he loved. No incident connected with his lost cause had so overwhelmed him as this. He felt he had forever ruined the woman that he loved, but, as he thought upon it, he could not blame himself. He realized how honor-

able had been his intentions in coming thither, but could he make others believe in his object?

Orma was the first to speak.

"Oh, my prince. Thou hast placed thyself again in the hands of thine enemies. Rather have left me to my fate than thus risk thine own life," she said.

"Nay, Orma, I fear not for myself. I am thinking of the position in which I have placed thee. I came here to conduct thee hence unto thy father's house but mine enemies can use my presence to thy discredit."

"Fear not for me," she said bravely, "as long as thou knowest me not dishonored I am content. As long as thou believest me unspotted I care not for what others may say."

He caught at the hint expressed in her speech and it gave him pleasure. His great love could have borne ill news but it was a relief to know it would not be put to the test.

"We must not stay here," he said after a short pause. "Some means of escape must be found. My chariot is waiting at the base of the gardens and if I do not return the driver will give the alarm."

He examined the door carefully but at once gave up all hope of attempting an escape in that direction. The door was stout and both hinges and lock were proof against breaking. The only remaining hope lay in the window. Upon examination this gave little encouragement. Evidently all the king's doves were not easily caged, else stout doors and heavy bars would have been unnecessary. At length he turned sadly to Orma.

"Unless we get help from outside we must stay here," he said.

"Let us pray that help from outside may come to us then," she said reverently.

"Pray! To whom?"

"To God." Then for the first time their religious differences came to her mind and she sighed deeply. Her lover noticed the sigh and smiled.

"Thou thinkest me an idolater, Orma," he said, "but I be-

lieve in prayer. When I was tied hand and foot in the drowning chamber I called upon my gods and they sent Ulbar to my assistance."

The girl made no reply but only sighed again. She mentally resolved never to cease petitioning until this proud idolater was brought to see the true God.

Another period of silence followed. The prince had given up all hope of escaping before nightfall. Then he intended cutting through the bars that held the heavy lattice in the window. He seated himself upon a stool and Orma reclined upon the couch. He questioned her concerning all that had happened since the day, only a short time before, when she held converse with a strange Arab in the market place. Orma narrated all that had occurred. Suddenly she stopped at a sign from him.

"I must tell thee," he exclaimed, "thy brother Heber is alive and well and is now an inmate of his father's house."

Orma gave a little cry and her face lit up with an expression of the greatest pleasure. Ah what a privilege it is to be the bearer of good news.

"But thyself," she said, suddenly remembering the last news she had heard of him. "How camest thou hither? How didst thou escape from thy enemies?"

"I was rescued by a body of Persians and carried to the camp of Cyrus. It was there I found Heber."

"Tell me all," she said, her animated face showing her interest.

Thus commanded he related all that had befallen him since the morning he and Orma had conversed in the Arab tent, closing with his reception at the hands of Nabonidos.

"Dost thou suspect the king of treachery?" she asked, referring to his present imprisonment.

"I know not but I am inclined to think Belshazzar is responsible for this present pleasure," he said smiling.

Further discussion of this subject was prevented by the entrance of Maraida who came with Orma's lunch. She

stopped abruptly upon seeing another occupant of the chamber. Orma noticing her confusion hastened to explain.

"Maraida, this is Prince Sheshbazzar, come to rescue me and himself made a prisoner."

"Prince," she continued, "this is Maraida who saved thy life by giving another babe to die for thee."

"Can it be possible?" he exclaimed, rising to greet the woman. "I have often questioned those who knew the circumstances of my rescue concerning thee but not one could tell what became of thee after the murder. I hope some day I can reward thee as thou deservest. For the present I can only express my gratitude."

Maraida set down her burden, expressing as she did so the hope that she had brought enough for two. The prince drew his stool up beside Orma and together they partook of the refreshments. The woman sat silently watching them as they ate. She was evidently absorbed in thought. When they finished eating she arose and hastily collected what remained, preparatory to taking her departure.

At the door she stopped and turned to speak to them.

"Tonight," she said, and then hesitated. "Tonight," she repeated, "when all is dark and still I will unbolt the door. Thou wilt then know what to do."

"Oh, Maraida, thou art an angel!" exclaimed Orma. "But," she added, "thou must come with us.

Maraida shook her head sadly.

"Ah no," she said, "I have been here so long I would not know how to live elsewhere. Here I have spent the best years of my life and here I must die."

Before either of them could speak she had glided through the door and closed it behind her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

INTO THE DARK WATERS

The hours of the afternoon drifted slowly by, yet but for their present predicament both prisoners would have found the time enjoyable. As it was the irksomeness of their imprisonment was greatly relieved by the joy of being together. Thus while the time passed slowly, its flight was more rapid than it would have seemed to either one alone. To Orma, in comparison with the other days of her captivity, it passed quickly. The afternoon was spent wholly in conversation. Up to this time they had never been alone save for an occasional very brief period. Because of their previous lack of opportunities the present communion was doubly precious. The prince, usually so reserved, in the presence of his love revealed his whole nature, his deep love and his true nobility of character. Their conversation touched upon nearly every topic, one only being omitted, that of religion. Orma, with her womanly tact, saw little to be gained by continually harassing the prince upon a subject she knew to be distasteful to him.

With evening came Maraida bearing a tray well supplied with food and drink. Together they partook of the refreshment, and as they ate Sheshbazzar questioned the woman as to the number and location of the guards. She informed him there were usually six eunuchs in attendance at the villa, but of late several negro slaves had been added. During the afternoon, she said, several palace guards had arrived and were stationed outside the villa and scattered through the gardens. The prince received this unwelcome information with the calmness peculiar to his race, but it gave him inward misgivings. He realized the difficulties ahead of him, and he almost despaired of effecting an escape, even with Maraida's assistance. As she told of the number of guards, a question presented itself to his mind and he at once gave it utterance.

"With this force on guard, how was I able to enter so easily?" he asked.

"Perhaps they were willing to let thee in," she answered naïvely.

"I see it all," he said. "Anticipating this attempt on my part, Belshazzar gave orders to allow me to enter and then keep me here. Orma, we must leave here tonight. Better to die escaping than to remain in this place."

"We will die together," she said, her face pale but her lips tightly closed with determination.

"I will keep my word if it is possible," said Maraida.

"Hast thou then doubts as to thy ability to help us?" he asked.

"There are many difficulties in the way," she answered, "but I am a privileged person here and I may be able to carry out the part I suggested. It all depends upon how the guards are placed. Should they be inside the building I cannot aid thee. If I find I cannot undo the fastenings of the door I will endeavor to find some other means of assisting thee. Believe me thou must leave tonight. Tomorrow the king leaves the city and everything will be left in the hands of Belshazzar. He can then carry out his plans without fear. I have assurance that up to this time fear of his father has restrained him. For several days the old king has contrived to keep his son within the palace."

"But Nabonidos has promised to release Orma," interposed the prince.

The woman hesitated, surprised at the information. Suddenly a light seemed to break in upon her.

"Then Nabonidos it was who sent the guards here this afternoon. But Belshazzar has turned them to his own purposes. The officer in command is already deep in league with the boy. I have been questioning one of the guards and therefore I know whereof I speak."

"What is the officer's name?" asked the prince.

"Shemakin," she replied.

"Shemakin, the traitor!" cried the prince, leaping to his feet.

For several moments he paced back and forth before the two women. His hands were clenched and his swarthy brow was as dark as a thunder cloud. His passions were striving to gain the mastery over him and were well nigh successful. All trace of his habitual calmness was gone. At length he stopped his rapid walk and faced the woman of his heart.

"Orma!" he exclaimed. "There will be death here in this place tonight and if my hand strikes down a fellow man thou must not judge me harshly. We will escape without shedding blood if possible, but rather than be foiled in our attempt I shall use my weapons and strike to kill. This Shemakin is the man whose treachery defeated me in my attempt to win the throne. If this night we meet the hand behind the dagger will be strengthened by revenge."

Orma looked upon her lover surprised and fearful. Never before had she seen this side of his character. To her he had always been the courtly, gallant noble. His manner toward her had always been one of gentleness. She had never before realized the depth of passion of which he was capable. Yet, though she shrank from him in his present mood, she secretly admired him. She realized as well as a woman could the forces that inspired such passion but she secretly prayed that he be saved from the crime of murder.

He turned away from them and approached the window. For several moments he stood there leaning against the casement. The eyes of both women were upon him; both realized the struggle taking place within him. At length his better nature triumphed over his dark passion and, when he turned to them again his brow was serene, his lips smiling. All traces of the murderous mood had passed away and he stood before them calm and self-possessed.

He seated himself upon the couch beside Orma and drew her to him.

"My love," he whispered, "forgive this outburst. I was beside myself and knew not what I said. For the moment my

passions were beyond my control. I shall do no murder. But," he added, "it will be best for all concerned that no guard attempt to stop us."

Maraida now gathered up the remains of the meal and departed.

"Thou wilt hear from me before morning," was her farewell.

When she had gone Sheshbazzar set to work to effect their escape. He too realized the necessity of getting Orma away from Belshazzar before Nabonidos left the city. Maraida's words proved to the prince the king's sincerity. He only regretted that Nabonidos had made so unfortunate a selection of a commander for his rescuing band. For the moment the gods seemed to favor the boy king.

"But," thought the prince, "he has no maiden to deal with now. The gods grant I be kept from murder, but if I must use my weapons I shall feel myself justified."

During his struggle at the window he had made an examination of the heavy lattice that filled the opening. It was of wood and was held in place by three heavy bars that crossed it on the outside. He believed it possible to cut through these bars but it meant several hours of hard work. In order to escape before morning he must begin work at once and not wait for darkness to set in. While Maraida might be able to release them he yet determined to have another avenue of escape open. Accordingly he selected the sharpest of his daggers and began whittling at the lowest bar. The wood was tough and hard and the weapon little adapted for such work, but after an hour's continuous labor the bar was so nearly cut that a strong push upon the lattice would break it. Then he began work upon the opposite end of the bar. As he continued working his dexterity increased but it was another hour before the second cut was completed. At this rate it would be after midnight before he could hope to have the work completed. Orma stood at his side and watched him as he labored. She assisted by whetting the idle dagger against the sill of the

window while he worked with the other. Her own weapon he had rejected as too light for the work in hand.

Darkness closed in. It was a pleasant night but only the light of the stars illuminated it. The moon would not rise until toward morning. After the sun's light failed the prince found his work still harder. He realized now that it would have been wiser to cut the topmost bar first and leave the lower until the last, but the error had been made and it was too late to rectify it. At length the middle bar was done and he must now work upon the topmost one. With Orma's aid he drew the couch up close to the window and by standing on the couch he could reach to work.

While he was working on the last bar between them and liberty a low click was heard as the bolts of the door were slipped back. Neither Orma nor the prince spoke, waiting for the newcomer to do so first. If it was not Maraida they wished to know it before declaring themselves. In a moment the unseen one spoke and it was their faithful friend.

"Where art thou?" she whispered. "It is I, Maraida."

"Here by the window," answered the prince.

They heard her groping across the room, now hitting this object, now that. At last she struck the couch and stopped.

"I can leave thy door unlocked," she said, "but it will be of no avail. Two guards are stationed at the outside door."

"Where are the others?" asked the prince.

"Two eunuchs are upstairs, two are at the back of the house and the fifth is in his room. The other I cannot locate. The two guards at the door are all I can see. The others and the negroes must be outside guarding the paths and stairs. Oh sir, I fear thou canst never escape."

"We will," he hissed and turned again to his work.

"Maraida," whispered Orma, "thou must come with us. Thou shalt live in my home. Since my mother's death I have been very lonely. Come and be a companion unto me."

"Nay," answered the woman, "I cannot; I dare not. As long as Nabonidos lives I must remain here. Should I leave

here and go to thy home it would but bring trouble upon the heads of thyself and friends. As to a companion, my dear, methinks thou wilt soon have one more to thy liking than a former concubine. Ah no, I must die here. I am inured to the life now. I can stand it a few years more. Then death will release me forever."

"Be it as thou wishest," answered Orma sadly as she put her arm around the woman's waist.

"If I live and leave this place I shall always remember thee and sooner or later I hope to welcome thee to my home. If I die thou wilt have the consciousness of having done a kindness in even allowing me to find death instead of dishonor. Thou hast made my captivity less irksome and I shall always love thee for it."

Maraida turned to Orma and whispered: "Before thou leavest this place I have something to say unto thee. Come to the other side of the room."

Orma followed her wonderingly. In a few brief terse sentences the woman revealed unto her a secret that made her heart beat violently and sent the blood coursing through her veins.

"Remember, my dear, this secret is not to be disclosed to anyone; at least not for the present," she said in closing.

"Come, all is ready," called the prince.

Orma turned hastily to Maraida and, reaching up, kissed her tenderly. "Farewell Maraida, until we meet again," she whispered.

The prince climbed down from the couch and felt his way across the room until he stood beside them. Then he too, in a few brief manly sentences bade farewell to the woman who had saved his life.

Maraida left the room and they heard the bars slide into place. They were alone and all was ready for their escape. The prince placed his arm tenderly about his love and pressed her tightly to his breast. He kissed her upon her fair white forehead and whispered in her ear:

"Orma, my love, my own. If I am to die this night this will be my farewell. I may never have another opportunity."

"Nay, my prince, we will die together," she said.

"But we will hope for life and happiness. Come my love, one more kiss and we will leave. May the gods be with us and help us in our escape."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his bearded cheek. Then he led her toward the window and assisted her to climb upon the sill. He climbed up beside her and stood a moment listening. All was quiet. He gave a strong push upon the lattice. There was a slight cracking noise as the bars gave way and then a dull thud as the heavy lattice fell into the long grass below. He sat upon the sill, his feet hanging outside, and bade Orma to do likewise. When she was beside him he caught her under both arms and swung her clear of the sill. Slowly he lowered her until he could reach over no farther and then let go. She dropped silently upon the turf and in another moment he was beside her.

Thus far all had gone well. He waited a moment and listened. Not a sound revealed the presence of a guard. He bade Orma remain where she was while he crept to the front of the house. In order to reach the stairs they must pass around the villa and he wished to know what opposition he might meet. He dropped upon his knees and thus slowly made his way along until he reached the corner of the villa. Again he stopped and listened. It was still quiet. Emboldened by the stillness he crept around the corner and slowly worked his way to the very entrance. Cautiously he raised himself and looked over the railing of the narrow veranda. Two guards sat under his very eyes. He could have reached out and touched them. In the darkness he could not tell whether they were awake or asleep but he at least judged them to be not overalert.

He again dropped to his knees and slowly made his way back to Orma's side.

"Follow me." he whispered, "all bids fair for a successful escape."

She dropped upon her knees and followed him as best she could. He followed the route he had previously taken until they reached the corner of the house. Then he branched off to the left, keeping in the shadow of a row of shrubs, Orma following at a distance of about four feet. They kept behind the shrubs until they had completed a half-circle and were in front of the villa but upon the opposite side of the path leading to the stairs. Sheshbazzar arose and whispered to Orma. She arose and stood behind him.

"We will wait a moment and then hurry to the stairs. Keep behind trees and bushes all the way, but wait, give me thy hand and we will keep together, else if the guard become alarmed we may become separated," he said.

Thus together they made a dash for the stairs, keeping well to the edge of the mound and as far from the path as possible. A few moments later they paused behind a clump of trees close beside the stairway. Their next step would place them in the open with nothing but the dim light to aid them.

Sheshbazzar waited only a moment for Orma to regain her breath. Then he dropped to his knees again and crawled to the edge of the stairway. He half raised himself and peered over the stone parapet. Just beneath him he could barely distinguish the figure of a man sitting upon the stairs. He turned and retraced his steps to Orma's side.

"There is a guard at the head of the stairs, my love. May the gods forgive me the deed but our safety requires his death. Come," he whispered hoarsely.

She nestled close beside him and together they worked their way through the bushes toward the stairs. At the very edge of the clearing he left her while he went to clear the path of the obstacle. Orma remained behind a small shrub and awaited his return. Her heart beat so violently that its pulsations seemed almost audible. Moments that seemed ages passed and her lover did not return. She listened but not a sound came to tell her of what was taking place. At length she heard a rustle beside her and in another moment the prince was with her.

"Our path is clear," he said in a tense strained whisper.

Trusting herself to his guidance she followed him. Near the head of the stairs they paused while he gave her a few whispered directions.

"We must make a dash for it," he said. "Keep close to me and if anyone opposes us, do thou stand behind me."

He sprang across the intervening space and she following, they reached the head of the stairs safely and started down. Orma stumbled but quickly regained her balance, noticing with horror the object that tripped her feet. It was the body of the guard. Down, down they hurried. In their anxiety it seemed as if the stairs were innumerable, but at length they reached the bottom. Once upon the next stage the prince breathed more freely. He imagined the guards would all be upon the topmost terrace, but for all his belief, he did not relax his vigilance. From the foot of the first stairway to the top of the second was less than an hundred feet. Still keeping in the shrubbery they described another circle and in fifteen minutes were at the head of the second stairway. The prince reconnoitered again but found no guard.

As before they made a dash down the stairs, reaching the bottom in safety. In the shrubbery at the foot they stopped to rest a moment before going farther. Neither spoke. The shadow of the deed committed at the first stairs weighed upon both their minds. It was the first time Sheshbazzar had used a dagger in the dark and the deed was distasteful to his soldier's sense of honor. Nevertheless it was an act of necessity.

They waited but a few moments. Then the prince arose and assisted Orma to do likewise. They continued their way as before, always keeping well hidden in the shrubbery, yet always near enough the path to prevent losing their way. In a few moments they had reached the foot of the next stairway, and they were on the lowest terrace. One more stairway and they would be upon solid ground but the most difficult portion of their descent yet remained. Heretofore they had been traversing the eastern or water side of the garden, but now they

must seek the stairs that led down to the temple street. To reach the stairs they were obliged to entirely cross the garden, a distance of nearly five hundred feet, and the shrubbery was much thinner than upon the upper terraces.

As they sat behind a tall bush close beside the stairway they had just descended, they heard voices. The prince cautiously peered out from his shelter and watched. A moment later two shadows could be seen coming rapidly down the stairs. He judged them to be guards who no doubt had found the body of their comrade and were looking for his slayer. At the foot of the stairs they stopped and consulted as to the direction to be pursued.

"How many men are there on this terrace?" asked one.

"Ten," replied the other. "There are two at the land stairs, two at the water stairs and six among the trees."

Sheshbazzar's heart sank at this information.

"What's the trouble anyway?" asked the first speaker.

"I don't know. There is some prisoner up yonder most likely."

"But what killed Murdath?"

"That's it. That's what gets me. I spoke to him and then went away. When I came back he lay on the stairs, dead. There's mischief here tonight and for my part I don't like it. Well, let's see what we can find. Thou go one way and I'll go the other and we'll meet here again."

Just as they turned to pursue their two courses another shadow came down the stairs. The soldiers hailed him.

"What's the trouble here tonight?" one called.

"Trouble!" answered the newcomer, whose voice proved him to be Shemakin. "Two of the king's prisoners have escaped and if they're not caught there'll be some dead guards around here. They can't leave the gardens. There's ten talents ready for the man who captures them."

"Ten talents!" cried one of the soldiers, "I'd kill my own mother for half that. Come," he said to his companion, "let's

find this precious pair. Ten talents will buy a farm up the river and we'll be land owners."

The prince saw them leave but he was unable to make out Shemakin. He was sure the officer left the spot, but he knew not in which direction he went. Meanwhile Orma sat upon the grass trembling in every limb. Capture seemed imminent, for if they could not get out of the gardens before daylight they were lost. All depended on their reaching safety before the sun rose or for that matter before the moon rose. The prince turned to her.

"My love," he whispered, "we cannot stay here. By remaining here we may elude them for the present but they will surely find us in the morning."

As a child Sheshbazzar had made the gardens his playground and every inch of their surface was familiar to him. This knowledge was now to stand him in good stead. He remembered the existence of a narrow shaft that led down from this terrace into the pillared gallery below. If they could but reach that gallery they would be reasonably secure, for amid those countless columns, each one more than twenty feet in circumference, it would be impossible to find them. To reach the shaft, however, they would have to cross a wide, open path; but there was no alternative. He assisted Orma to her feet but she sank down again with a groan. He bent over her tenderly.

"Orma, my love, what aileth thee?" he asked.

"Oh, my ankle," she moaned, "it is sprained."

He reached down and felt of the injured member. It was already badly swollen. She had sprained it when she stumbled over the dead guard, but had kept bravely on with never a murmur. He remembered now how several times he had been obliged to urge her to further haste. It was an unfortunate accident but could not be helped. There was but one thing to do and the prince did it. He picked her up bodily and with her in his arms set out to find the shaft that led to liberty.

Before he had gone twenty feet he ran plump into a guard. Turning instantly he dashed away in the opposite direction.

"Ho, guards," called the fellow lustily.

Men seemed to rise from the ground, so quickly were they surrounded. The prince glanced hastily around him. Scarcely ten feet away he saw the clump of trees that surrounded the shaft, but between him and the goal he wished to reach were three guards. He turned in all directions. He seemed hemmed in but he mentally resolved to die hard.

"Orma, my love, thou hast a dagger. Turn it on thyself if I am killed," he whispered.

Then shifting her so that her weight came upon his left arm and shoulder, he grasped his dagger firmly in his right hand and sprang through a clump of bushes. Orma though short was plump and her weight was no trifle, but the prince was muscular and while his burden was somewhat of a hindrance, he made good time. The guards gave chase. A fortune awaited the man who caught them. Through the underbrush he dashed, Orma clinging firmly to his neck. He dodged and turned back upon his tracks several times, ever striving to reach the shaft but unconsciously getting farther away from it and nearer to the edge of the mound.

The numbers of his pursuers increased and they were fast closing in upon him. He ran hither and thither only to be confronted by a guard at each turn and forced back. He saw clearly that this sort of chase must end in capture. The guards hitherto had acted as individuals, each man striving to capture the fugitives single handed that he might secure the entire reward, but now Shemakin had joined them and under his directions they formed a complete circle about the fugitives. Thus in a long unbroken line the guards closed in upon them.

Sheshbazzar stopped a moment and looked about him to find, if possible, an opening through which he could dash. He was sure from the numbers composing the circle that practically all the guards had joined the chase. Therefore if he could elude that advancing line his chances of reaching the

street were good. Suddenly a new thought flashed through his mind. It suggested a desperate move but it promised a chance for life. He turned quickly and dashed through an opening in the line toward the edge of the mound. It was only twenty feet but as he gained the edge the hand of the foremost pursuer was almost upon him. He turned upon the fellow like a flash and lunged at him viciously with his dagger. He only grazed the man but so fierce was the onslaught that the guard stepped backward and in that instant the prince recognized him. It was Shemakin. The advantage was only momentary but in that moment their lives were saved. Before Shemakin rallied and again attempted to grasp the prince, the latter turned to the edge of the mound. Only a second he stood there outlined against the dark background. He plunged forward. There was a stifled shriek from Orma as she felt herself falling through space, a loud splash and then all was still.

"Men, to the boats," called Shemakin.

CHAPTER XXXIX

TO THE FRONT

Immediately after they rose to the surface of the reservoir Sheshbazzar struck out with his unengaged arm and in a few moments reached the brick embankment. He climbed out and drew Orma up beside him. Once they were upon the bank the prince lifted her up again and hurried across the narrow shelf into the vast pillared gallery beneath the Hanging Gardens. When hidden safely inside he stopped behind one of the immense pillars that he might learn the tactics of the pursuers. He could hear talking and shouting at the water stairs. Two barges were usually moored there and the prince judged they would be manned by the pursuers in an attempt to pick them up before they could reach land.

In another moment he heard the splash of paddles as the first

barge left the landing. It was followed immediately by the second. Sheshbazzar left Orma while he made his way to the very edge of the gallery to watch their movements. The first rays of the rising moon were reflected upon the glass surface of the reservoir and by their light he could distinguish the figures in the two barges. Their numbers gave him a sudden hope and he hastily returned to Orma.

"Come," he said, "we must find the shaft and return to the terrace above. Practically all of the guards are in the boats looking for us in the water. If we are quick we can gain the street before they give up their search."

He lifted her tenderly in his arms and started in the direction of the shaft. It was not an easy task to find it in the dark although he knew its location perfectly. In a vast gallery like the one they were traversing, where its only feature was duplicated a thousand times, it was hard to locate any definite spot. At length, after many turnings and wanderings he came upon the narrow shaft where he least expected it. Contained within the shaft was a steep and narrow staircase leading up to the gardens above. It was so narrow that he could not carry Orma as he had been doing, but had to take her upon his back. She put her arms about his neck and clung to him as he slowly mounted step by step to the gardens above.

They emerged in the center of a clump of trees where even if surrounded by enemies they would have been unseen. The prince laid down his burden beside a giant trunk while he went outside to reconnoiter. As far as he could judge the garden was deserted. He returned quickly and again took up his burden, which lovely though it was, was fast becoming almost unendurably heavy.

Cautiously he made his way through the seemingly deserted garden, always keeping in the shadow as far as possible. Upon this stage of the gardens there were many open spaces, causing him to make long detours to avoid crossing them. The moon had now risen, enjoining him to still greater vigilance. Heretofore the darkness had been their chief ally but now amidst the

silvery radiance all could be seen. Orma was becoming heavier every moment until it seemed to the prince that he must drop her. She, brave girl, several times offered to walk again but he persistently rejected her offers. A soldier is always more or less of a surgeon and he accordingly was aware of the seriousness of her hurt. It seemed miraculous that her will had kept her going so long before revealing the injury to him.

The darkest night at length gives way to day, the longest journey is eventually completed, the hardest task is at last finished. At length he emerged from the shadow of the clump of trees nearest the land stairs and looked about him to see if all was clear. Instantly he was seen by a soldier who was standing close at hand. The man raised a trumpet to his lips and blew three long blasts. From all parts of the garden men came running. The prince turned to retreat but a tall soldier opposed him. He turned to the right and a soldier stood there. It was useless. They were caged with the last avenue of escape closed to them. The prince dropped Orma beside the nearest large tree while he, standing beside her, his back to the trunk, awaited the coming enemy. In his right hand he held his only remaining dagger, the other having been lost at the moment he leaped into the reservoir.

The soldiers made no move to take them but stood around as if waiting for their commander. In a few moments he came.

"Thanks be to Bel," he cried as he sprang toward the despairing, beaten prince.

It was Belibus. Instantly the fugitive recognized the soldiers. They were the Winged Lions. The sudden revulsion of feeling sapped his remaining strength and he sank down beside Orma. His weakness was but momentary and he arose again. Belibus grasped his hand affectionately as he gained his feet.

"Oh my Prince," he cried, "we feared thine enemies had triumphed."

"How happens it thou art here?" asked the prince.

Belibus made no direct reply. To change the subject he announced the presence at the land stairs of a chariot to convey

them thence. The prince was about to take up Orma again when Belibus interposed. He called up two soldiers who made a chair of their hands and thus carried the dripping girl down the stairs and deposited her in the vehicle.

By this time it was nearly morning. Already the first tinge of red illuminated the eastern sky. They reached the house of Nehum after the family had arisen. The reunion was a joyous one for all but more especially for Orma and Heber. While the affecting scene was in progress Sheshbazzar stood to one side, forgotten for the moment. At length Orma left them to change her wet clothing, and then Nehum be-thought him of his daughter's rescuer. He grasped the young man's hand effusively and leaning over, raised it to his lips, at the same moment bathing it in the tears that coursed down his furrowed cheeks.

"My son, my son," he cried, "doubly am I thankful to thee now. Twice hast thou saved my daughter from death, this time from worse than death. How shall I ever repay thee?"

"There is but one reward I desire," the prince said smiling.

The old man fathomed his meaning and it gave him pain. He was silent a moment as if at a loss for an answer.

"Thou art worthy of her, Prince. I hope some day to see thee happily wed but O sir, there yet remains mine original objection, thy religion."

The brow of the young man darkened. While he took no great credit upon himself for the deeds of the night now passed he yet felt at such a time that Nehum's words were inopportune and unnecessary.

"My religion sir, is my own and I see no reason for changing it. I would indeed be unworthy of thy daughter if I forsook my gods without my heart indicating such action. I love thy daughter as thou knowest and I aspire to make her my wife but I cannot change my religion without cause. A man's religion is not as an old coat, to be worn or discarded or exchanged at will."

The old man sighed but made no reply. A few moments

later Sheshbazzar, pleading the necessity of visiting the palace immediately, preparatory to leaving for the front, bade them farewell. Nehum urged the prince to change his attire and have some food with them but he refused. Orma came out newly arrayed just as he was leaving and in the presence of them all he took her in his arms and kissed her upturned face.

"Farewell my love," he whispered. "If I return from the war alive I hope to make thee my wife."

She looked up steadfastly into his face as she answered: "I will gladly become thy wife when my father gives his consent."

Sheshbazzar hurried toward the palace and was fortunate to reach it before the royal party left for the front. The palace yard was a scene of great activity. Servants were scurrying about with baggage and others were holding the horses of the party. A few paces back from the great entrance stood the Winged Lions ready for an immediate start. At their head was Belibus.

The prince waved a greeting to his former lieutenant and entered the palace. He sought the king at once. The royal reception room was also a scene of activity. The officers and nobles who were to accompany the king stood about in groups waiting the word to mount. Nabonidos was giving Belshazzar his final instructions as to the conduct of affairs during his absence. The boy readily promised to see that all preparations for defence were hurried forward and everything made ready for a siege. In case worse came to worse the army of the frontier could seek shelter within the walls.

It was not until after the old king had finished instructing his son that he observed the presence of Sheshbazzar. As soon as the monarch beheld the prince he advanced to greet him, his unhandsome face illuminated by a pleasant smile.

"We missed thee Prince and feared some evil had befallen thee. I am glad to see thee back well and no doubt ready to lead our armies against our foes," he said.

"I met with a little adventur that delayed me but I am here ready to do whatever Babylon asks of me," replied the prince.

"What adventure hast thou had?" asked the king.

"Nothing at all serious. I merely assisted a young woman to escape from the hands of a seducer," he answered, glancing at Belshazzar and receiving a look of enmity in return.

The monarch smiled as if he understood the adventure referred to. His next remark proved his knowledge.

"Thou wouldst not trust thy king, but must needs perform the deed of valor alone and unassisted; but hold, I yesterday sent a company of guards to liberate the maiden."

The prince shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us hope," he said, "our troops opposing Cyrus will better obey their orders."

"They disobeyed? I will attend to this matter upon my return. There is now no time. Another time, Prince, it would be best to take thy king into thy confidence. Here this worthy priest Neboakhu has turned the city upside down and even accused his sovereign of murder, all because a young adventurer went off to rescue his lady fair with his single arm. To appease the angry priest I arose from my couch during the small hours and sent Belibus to find thee."

"For that act accept my sincere thanks, King Nabonidos. Belibus arrived in time to enable me to reach thee before thou left the city. Had I known the odds against me I would not have undertaken the task alone," replied the prince looking suggestively at Belshazzar.

"As long as thou art here to go with us this morning no harm is done but it would have gone hard with whoever prevented thy being here," said the king, raising his voice.

It was more apparent than ever before to those standing about how great a farce was the elevation of Belshazzar. While his father had previously treated him as an associate and even made a show of consultation with him, this morning he had given him orders as imperative and explicit as he would have given to a common officer. Now that the conversation turned upon military matters the boy was ignored entirely. He sat on his throne, moody and silent, alone and despised.

He sullenly watched the scene about him, his face dark and forbidding.

At an opportune time when Sheshbazzar was momentarily disengaged, Belshazzar slipped to his side and hissed into his ear:

"Thou hast beaten me for the moment, Sheshbazzar, but my turn will come. Despite this silly friendship my father has suddenly shown for thee, I will have my revenge. Remember from today I am sole king within these walls."

"I fear thee not, Belshazzar, but remember thou, if aught befalls the woman of my heart while I am gone I will have thy life though I were to die the next moment," was the reply. Sheshbazzar's tone was calm and dispassionate but he spoke with an air of stern determination that informed his hearer he meant every word.

Nabonidos, who had been absent from the room for several moments, now returned completely attired and accoutred for the journey. He approached Sheshbazzar, and the boy king, muttering something unintelligible, slipped away.

"Thou art wet Prince, and must make a change of garments. In the anteroom adjoining thou wilt find clothing and armor befitting thy rank as commander of the forces of Babylon," said the king.

The prince went at once to the apartment mentioned and with the assistance of a servant he there found, donned the magnificent uniform a generous monarch had provided for him. All the gorgeousness the customs of the land and time demanded was condensed in the king's costly gift. The garments were made of the richest material, the original ground work almost hidden beneath the splendid embroideries. The armor was of the finest hammered bronze covered with representations of battle and hunting scenes etched on by the most expert engravers of the age, while here and there a precious stone was embedded. The sword was short but unusually heavy; it was double-edged and had a hilt of gold and pearl.

As soon as he was arrayed in this gorgeous attire the prince

returned to the throne room. During his absence the various groups of waiting nobles had been merged into one with King Nabonidos at its head. As the soldier entered the room the king advanced to meet him, took him by the arm and led him toward the assembled company.

"Nobles of Babylon," said Nabonidos, "I present to thee Prince Sheshbazzar, General-in-Chief of the armies of Babylon."

An almost audible murmur of surprise ran through the group. Many of the more patriotic among the nobles felt exultant as they recognized their old acquaintance, Nabomuran. One by one they advanced to greet their commander, the king calling each by name. Many of them were already known to the young man and for all such he had a pleasant word of recognition.

For a few moments all was bustle and apparent confusion as the entire party repaired to the palace yard. One by one they picked out each his own mount. Sheshbazzar bethought him of the fine steed the king had given him the preceding day and which he had left in the stables of Neboakhu. He stood apart, near the palace entrance, watching the scene before him, hardly knowing where in the bustle he belonged. To his surprise he saw a groom approaching leading his own black mare. He glanced toward the king and found Nabonidos laughing at his bewilderment.

"Never mind, Prince, I will explain," he called.

Sheshbazzar vaulted into the saddle and received from the groom such pieces of his armor as he had laid aside before mounting. He remained where he had mounted not knowing where his particular station would be, forgetting for the moment that his birth was higher than that of any of the others present, not excepting the king himself. When all was ready for the start Nabonidos rode up beside him.

"Come," he said, "thy place is beside mine at the head of the column."

"But these?" pointing to the company, which contained the blue blood of Babylon.

The king smiled.

"Hast thou forgotten thine own birth and rank?" he asked.

Then for the first time the prince realized the position in which the king's magnanimity placed him. The General-in-Chief of the army and still greater acknowledged by the king as prince royal of Babylon, he outranked all others present and many of the attendant nobles were men he had once looked up to as little less than gods. The sense of his position was well nigh overwhelming to the modest young soldier. He realized the unselfishness of Nabonidos in thus acknowledging him, for it constituted a semi-surrender of the monarch's own title to royalty. The king knew full well what thoughts would enter the minds of many of his nobles, a great number of whom had never given him their full allegiance, some even terming him a regent holding the throne in trust until the Lost Prince was found. The king therefore ran the risk of having these men demand his retirement in favor of the legitimate prince. He at least invited discord when they returned, if they returned victorious. Perhaps Nabonidos had a presentiment of the coming catastrophe and was thereby made reckless.

The mind of Sheshbazzar dwelt upon these things as he rode at the king's side. He attempted to fathom the impulses and purposes behind such acts. He was preoccupied, thus calling forth a protest from the king.

"What is passing in thy mind, Prince, that thou art thus silent?"

"I am thinking of thy treatment of me and endeavoring to discover the causes of it."

"Thou doubttest my sincerity?" asked the king quickly.

"Nay, King, but I admit myself at a loss to comprehend thy motives."

"Then I will tell thee," said Nabonidas. "I had not intended revealing my plans unto thee until it was decided who should reign in Babylon, King Cyrus or myself, but for the sake

of pleasanter company on the road I will tell thee all. To begin with, although I am not an old man, my life has been such that I feel myself prematurely aged. Therefore in order to train my son in the duties of kingship I raised him to his present position. I am disappointed in him, but that has nothing to do with my present plans. I learn from our worthy physician that Belshazzar is in the clutches of a disease that must cause his death ere many years or even months have passed. As his death is so a matter of certainty I have been thinking of what would become of the throne at his death. There is a man, not unknown to thee, who for years has been plotting to make himself king and the extinction of my line would give him his opportunity. I then thought of thee and of the rights for which thou wert battling. I did my best to defeat thy aims but it was not for revenge or any other selfish motive. What I would resist thy taking at the sword's point I would freely give thee of mine own will. My present conduct arises then from my desire to make thee my heir, who at my death shall become king of this great empire. Yea, more than that. Should Belshazzar's death precede mine I will then abdicate in thy favor."

The prince was visibly affected.

"King Nabonidos," he said, "I have injured thee in thought more even than in deed. I denied thee the capacity for noble thoughts and actions, but the best of men could do no more than thou plannest to do. Thy motives are unselfish. Thou hast thought more of Babylon than of thyself, thus showing the true kingly spirit."

"Young man," said the king, "I will take no credit not my due. I must admit that it will give me as much pleasure to thwart Vulmaran as to do thee justice."

"Vulmaran?"

"Yea, he is the man who desires to become king. He is the man who would have murdered thee had I not sent Ulbar to thine assistance and he is the man who would have caused my death as quickly as he attempted thine."

A flood of light was let into the prince's mind by these words. While openly opposing him the king had been his secret friend. Still there were many points yet unexplained.

"But thou sent a force to take me prisoner when I was in the city, disguised as an Arab, and thou sent a force against my camp with orders to take me dead or alive," he said.

Again the king smiled.

"When that Arab entered my presence I recognized him at once and determined to protect him. When Vulmaran also became possessed of the information I saw need of getting thee without the city. I therefore sent a company to take thee and carry thee to Sippara in order to keep thee out of Vulmaran's power. Thou wert rescued by whom I know not, but the next I heard thou wert at the head of a rebellious band. As king of Babylon it was my duty to break up that rebellion. When I heard that thy life had been sacrificed I was sad for I had hoped thou wouldst be taken alive and had given orders to that end."

"King Nabonidos," said the prince gravely, "I have indeed much to thank thee for. Thou, whom I have cursed as an enemy, hast in reality been my best friend."

"Thus is it always in life, Prince," observed the king. "One must know a man a lifetime ere classing him as friend or foe."

CHAPTER XL

THE TEST OF ARMS

It was late in the evening when King Nabonidos, Prince Sheshbazzar and their party rode into Sippara and went into quarters there. The first information to greet them was of the proximity of the Persians, who were encamped without the walls and it was expected that they would attack the following morning. To meet this emergency the new commander of the Babylonian forces remained up all night, conferring with his

subordinate commanders, receiving information regarding the strength and location of the enemy and studying the general lay of the land in the vicinity. As a result of his ceaseless labor he was able to submit a general plan of battle to his sovereign, a plan crude in comparison with modern methods of warfare, but one according with Oriental traditions.

Instead of waiting for the superior forces of the Persians to attack, Sheshbazzar proposed to attack the foe soon after day-break before the Persians had opportunity to form in any extended battle order. As the forces under his command included an unusually large proportion of cavalry he considered himself in a position to attack, trusting his infantry to hold stubbornly any advantage his dashing horsemen might gain. Rumors of the numberless chariots of King Cyrus were circulating freely among the troops, chariots with long scythes at either end of the axles that hewed down the opposing forces mercilessly. It so happened that Sheshbazzar had never engaged in a battle where these instruments of warfare were used and he was therefore obliged to invent a means of resisting them without the benefit of aid from experience. Ere morning the necessary plan was forthcoming, a plan be it said that for a moment shook the confidence of King Cyrus.

Daybreak found the city of Sippara in apparent confusion. The streets were filled with long lines of soldiers marching through from the camp on the west to the field of battle on the east. Early as it was Sheshbazzar had already ridden out to an elevation beyond the walls whence he could obtain a good view of the enemy's camp. He saw unmistakable signs of activity in the camp and galloped back to Sippara intent on hastening the attack. He sought out Nabonidos to consult with him but the king promptly handed all authority over to his general, saying he would be merely a spectator of the day's events. When, therefore, Sheshbazzar asked for the attendance of the Winged Lions his request was instantly granted. Placing himself at the head of that body with which his previous life had been so identified, he led the way without the city.

Upon the edge of the natural plateau selected by the ancient builder as the site of the holy city of Sippara, he stopped and intently watched the scene about and below him. A mile away, upon rising ground was the camp of the Persians, now alive with men hurrying hither and thither, forming into columns that they might get into line before the army of Babylon could strike. Beneath and midway between the city and the hostile camp were the advancing hosts of the Golden City, pushing forward with all the speed possible with their serried formation. It was a beautiful sight, this long line of warriors crowding forward, compact and solid, through the long grass still wet with the morning dew. Alas, ere the dew dried off a sadder moisture would be mingled with it, the blood of Babylon's best and noblest.

It was a critical moment. From out the opposite camp now filed the countless hosts of Media and Persia with their allied forces. With the celerity of long training column after column wheeled into line of battle until, some moments before the attacking line could strike, the solid ranks of spearmen and archers were braced for the shock and behind them, stretching away row on row were the horsemen and chariots.

"We lose the advantage of surprise," said Sheshbazzar quietly, speaking to Belibus who was at his side. Behind the two young men was a group of officers and nobles assigned by the king to duty as the general's staff while behind them still, impatiently awaiting their opportunity were the Winged Lions.

Another instant and the Babylonian cavalry broke into a gallop. On they went a very whirlwind of horses and men. In a moment the two lines came together and the leathern breeched warriors fell back. Slowly but surely they gave way before the irresistible horsemen of Babylon. Behind the cavalry marched the solid masses of infantry, following closely upon the attacking force, ready at any moment to join in the fray. The Persian infantry broke and wheeled, leaving broad avenues through which dashed the Persian horse galloping madly. The Babylonian cavalry wheeled, leaving the spearmen and archers to

receive the oncoming enemy. For a moment it seemed to the Babylonian commander as if his infantry gave way before the attack of the enemy's cavalry, but no, as the lines of horsemen came to a standstill the spearmen of Babylon could be seen standing as the walls of their capital city, an unbroken solid line. From the Babylonian archers there now flew clouds of arrows carrying death and panic into Persia's broken ranks. Watch ye, men of Babylon, for a new force in warfare is now coming against thee. The long line of chariots starts, the broken ranks of horsemen hastily making room for the newcomers. It was a grand sight. The sun shone upon the polished accoutrements of the horses and glanced from the long cruel scythes that projected from the chariot axles. The solid phalanxes of Babylon awaited silently and grimly the attack of the, to them, strange branch of warfare, but they had their orders and were merely waiting to carry them out, conscious that the genius of their commander had provided a method of rendering useless this important arm of the enemy's service.

When the oncoming line of vehicles was within a hundred paces of the stern men awaiting them, a shower of well directed arrows saluted them. The archers carried out their part well. Dead and wounded horses and men cumbered the field hindering their uninjured comrades. Instantly following the volley the ranks of the infantry broke into groups leaving wide spaces between them, into which such chariots as were not wrecked dashed. Then the lines again closed up and the chariots were at their mercy. King Cyrus watching the conflict from a slight eminence behind his line was filled with dismay at this catastrophe to his favorite arm. He instantly took command of his now reformed cavalry and ordered another charge. Again that stern unbending line beat back the Persian horsemen. They were assisted by the condition of the field, cumbered as it was with dead and wounded horses and disabled chariots. The archers sent volley after volley into the retreating ranks and the Babylonian cavalry harassed their flanks. Only the personal efforts of the conqueror himself prevented a rout.

That plan had failed but King Cyrus had another, and after that another and another still. However he found his confidence fast oozing out. He thought he had misjudged Nabonidos. Ah no, King Cyrus, thou art battling today against a foeman worthy of thy steel, who had he assumed command of that army months ago, might have changed the history of Asia and indeed of the world. But the Omnipotent rules and He is directing this Flodden Field of Mesopotamia.

After the failure of the charge that he had led in person, Cyrus ordered his infantry forward to a hand-to-hand engagement, placing in the front his invincible Median legions.

Upon the opposite elevation Prince Sheshbazzar sat silent and thoughtful watching the conflict beneath him. Occasionally he sent an aide with some instructions to those leading the various bodies of troops. Around him his officers were laughing and talking, elated at the present aspect of affairs and confident of success. Many a word of compliment was spoken of the silent young commander, but he, apparently so calm and at his ease, had little hope of winning the battle. He had been in the Persian camp and had some idea of the vast, innumerable hosts at his opponent's command. Then too, he realized far more than any other how greatly his brave little army had needed a commander for months past.

As he sat deeply intent upon the scene beneath him he suddenly raised his eyes and met with a sight that brought dismay to his heart. The sight was a body of Persian cavalry of such proportions as to be almost innumerable, approaching the Babylonian left flank at a gallop. The prince acted instantly.

"Yaddina, ride thou to Nergalmakin and order him to our support. The Winged Lions will attack yonder force," he cried pointing to the flanking column.

The officer designated dashed off to carry the message to the commander of the Babylonian cavalry. "Forward, men, at a gallop." The prince's command rang loud and clear.

With a cry the Winged Lions were in motion, the prince and Belibus at their head. Across the intervening plain they dashed

at full speed. Each man grasped his battle-axe with stern determination. Not one but thought he was riding to his death. An hundred men against thousands! With a heroism unsurpassed in history, Sheshbazzar and his little band threw themselves between the oncoming Persian host and the devoted lines of infantry still holding their own bravely against the continued attacks of King Cyrus's main army. In an instant the two bodies met and the strife became terrific, the Winged Lions fighting as became their name. The commander realized full well the futility of his little force engaging the overwhelming host that he had attacked, but he hoped to keep the enemy occupied until General Nergalmakin's cavalry could come to his support. That worthy man, either from jealousy or stupidity, mistook his orders and failed to bring his force into action. Thus the intrepid hundred were left to their fate, and who could question what that fate would be.

Surrounded on all sides by a terrible enemy, the men fought for their lives. Be it said that not one prisoner did the Persians take as a result of their engagement with the famous body-guard. It was man to man. Battle-axes and spears mingled in an indescribable *mêlée*. Such men as emerged alive from the terrible conflict could remember little that happened. They only fought and fought. Sheshbazzar was worthy of leading such a band. He performed deeds of valor seemingly impossible for a single man. Right and left he swung his heavy sword, breaking the spears of his adversaries as though they were but straws. Here and there he reined his horse, ever striving to reach the edge of the company surrounding them, hoping to save some of his beloved band from the death that seemed inevitable.

At the moment he saw his way clear to dash through the line and escape, only three men opposing him, he felt his horse sink beneath him. The animal fell in a heap pinning his rider to the ground. The prince gave himself up for lost. Thoughts of the sweet woman who ruled within his heart came into his mind and he wondered if she would mourn for him. He dimly saw a spear pointed at his breast and knew it would end his life in

another moment, but the thrust never came. He heard a sharp word of command and saw the spear withdrawn. He noticed also that the battle seemed over.

"Arise, Sheshbazzar," he heard a voice say. "This would indeed be a sorrowful day were such a life as thine sacrificed."

The prince struggled to his feet and looked for the speaker. Near at hand, seated upon a superb gray stallion, was Cyrus, King of Persia.

"King Cyrus," said the prince, "again do I owe my life to thee."

"Mention it not, Sheshbazzar. I saw thy beautiful charge and knew what its result must be, so I hastened here to stop the slaughter if possible. Thanks be to the gods I arrived in time."

"All this day have I been puzzled at the manner in which thy army fought. Expecting Nabonidos to command in person I had thought to win an easy victory, but as soon as the battle began I saw that I had a soldier to deal with. A few moments since a captured officer informed me the name of the wonderful soldier who for a moment made me despair of victory."

The prince bowed silently in recognition of the compliment.

"I suppose I am thy prisoner," he said a moment later.

"Nay, Prince," responded the generous conqueror. "Join thy troops, if thou canst find them. Thou hast fought a good fight but my numbers and my destiny were against thee. My armies are at this moment marching into Sippara, while thy king and the remnant of thy heroic force are hastening toward Babylon."

"A horse for this soldier," he commanded.

Sheshbazzar accepted the animal a soldier brought him and mounted at once.

"Again I accept thy kindness, King Cyrus. I trust the day will come when I can show my gratitude to thee," he said.

"Never fear. God has a work for thee yet, Sheshbazzar," answered the conqueror.

The prince thanked his generous enemy and, turning his horse's head toward Babylon, rode slowly away. He looked about for Belibus and the Winged Lions but found no trace of them.

The mount furnished by King Cyrus was not one he would have selected from his private stables to bestow upon a friend. He was tall and bony but like many unhandsome steeds was capable of considerable speed. The prince urged him forward. He was anxious to reach the head of the retreating army and lead it into Babylon in fairly good order. He took the defeat philosophically; indeed he had expected it. To soften the bitterness of it was the joy of having put up a good fight. He was proud of his army and its heroic struggle against overwhelming odds. He was still hopeful of maintaining a desperate defense behind the impregnable walls of the capital.

Occasionally he passed a group of soldiers hastening toward Babylon. For all he had the same command: "Return to Babylon with all speed."

Thus he rode on until nightfall, when tethering his horse to a solitary tree, he threw himself upon the grass, exhausted. Two nights without sleep and one day without food was more than even his iron frame could stand.

At ten o'clock the next morning he rode into Babylon, a city wild and panic-stricken. Reports of the great defeat were circulating freely through the streets, gaining additional size and details with each repetition. The inhabitants were terrified, momentarily expecting the approach of the victorious Persians. At the gateway the prince passed a solitary group of soldiers who were just entering.

"Where is the rest of the army?" he asked.

"At Borsippa, sir," responded an officer.

"Borsippa?" he cried, "who ordered it there?"

"The king, sir," was the reply.

The prince made no comment but rode on, sad and discouraged. Nabonidos had closed his reign with the greatest blunder of his life.

Not knowing where now to turn, the prince ended by riding through the city to the house of Nehum. In his present gloomy state of mind he felt nothing would so uplift him as an hour's interview with his beloved. He went directly to the little summer house so interwoven with previous memories to him, but it was deserted. Retracing his steps he approached the front entrance of the dwelling. He mounted to the veranda and knocked loudly upon the door-casing. After a wait of some moments his summons were answered by a servant. When he asked for Orma she seemed bewildered and disappeared, leaving him standing nonplussed upon the porch. A moment later Nehum came haltingly through the hall, bowed and aged. His face lighted with surprise at beholding his visitor.

"I am glad to see thee alive, Prince," he said, "but thy presence shows me clearly that what I have suspected is true. My daughter has been torn from my bosom a second time."

"Tell me all," cried the prince, aghast at the information.

"Last evening a soldier came to my house and said the army had met with defeat. He said that thou wert wounded unto death and had sent for my daughter to come and see thee while there was yet time. He said thou wouldst surely die and if she wished to see thee alive she must go at once. She went and has not returned. Thy presence here alive and uninjured proves the story to have been false, to have been used as a means to lure my daughter away."

"Good Nehum, someone shall die for this," cried the prince, his dark face livid with passion.

CHAPTER XLI

THE WORK OF A TRAITOR

Shortly before noon of the second day following the defeat of the Babylonian army at Sippara, the vanguard of the Persian host reached Babylon and before nightfall the next following day the investment of the city was complete. In order to realize the magnitude of King Cyrus's army it is only necessary to remember that the total length of the great outer wall was fifty-six miles. The people realized at once that they were in for a siege and no doubt a long one. Such walls as theirs could be neither pierced nor scaled and only by strategy or starvation could the city be taken. All the gates had been promptly closed and the guards upon the walls trebled. Throughout the day following the battle small parties of soldiers to whom the king's orders were unknown or whom Sheshbazzar had directed to Babylon, drifted into the city. Among them came Belibus and some twenty members of the Winged Lions, all that remained of that once proud organization.

Sheshbazzar had ridden directly from the house of Nehum to the palace and had had an interview with Belshazzar. His first impulse had been to charge the boy king with Orma's abduction and demand her release, but his second thought told him such a step would be unwise. He decided it would be better not to put Belshazzar upon his guard by such action. He determined to secretly ascertain the location of her new prison, rightly judging that the villa at the Hanging Gardens would not be used a second time. He therefore said nothing of the subject uppermost in his mind although hot words were continually upon his tongue demanding utterance. He had quietly informed the king that he was there as Commander-in-Chief of the army to receive such orders as the king desired to give in regard to the defence of the city. The boy fidgeted uneasily

at first, but not knowing what else to say, he at length committed the full charge of the defence into the prince's hands. Armed with this authority Sheshbazzar at once placed himself in touch with such remnants of the army as were within the walls. All told these forces amounted to less than six thousand men, including the two thousand always stationed in the city to guard the walls. In an emergency he could call upon the palace and city guards, numbering in all about five hundred men.

His first official act was the issuance of a proclamation calling upon all able-bodied citizens to volunteer for service in this hour of their nation's peril. He established himself in the old palace, the headquarters of the Winged Lions, and from this central fortress directed the work of defence. The ever-faithful Belibus, one arm disabled by a severe sword cut, was at his side ready to carry out any order his beloved superior might have for him, from running an errand to leading a forlorn hope. A small nature would have been jealous in Belibus's place. The elevation of Sheshbazzar had thrown a blanket over whatever ambitions the commander of the Winged Lions had. During the fight at Sippara he had behaved with his usual gallantry, but he had been overshadowed by the personality of the prince. No such thoughts, however, found lodgment in the great heart of Belibus. His love and admiration for the man at once his commander and his friend left no room for such unworthy feelings.

As a result of the prince's proclamation many citizens reported at the old palace. All such were gladly welcomed, furnished with arms and assigned to duty. The first recruit enlisted was the venerable Neboakhu who marched to the old palace at the head of three hundred priests.

"We are men of peace," he said, "but in times like these all men must learn to fight."

On the afternoon of June seventeenth (the day the Persians completed the lines about the city) the two young soldiers were together in the prince's apartment in the old palace, discussing

the events of the past few days. Sheshbazzar reclined upon a divan and his companion paced up and down before him. At length their conversation turned upon the present, its problems and its dangers.

"I would we had men enough to make a sortie occasionally. This being cooped up within walls to be starved into submission is disheartening to a soldier," said Belibus.

"Starvation is not a very present danger, my Belibus," replied the prince. "There are fields enough between the walls to keep us from actual starvation. Of course it will be a hardship for such meat eaters as we Babylonians to live on grain alone but we can do it rather than surrender our city."

"Then thou hast hopes of tiring out our enemies?"

"Nay, Belibus, I entertain no false hopes. I have confidence in the strength of our walls to withstand breaching and in their height to withstand scaling. Neither do I fear starvation, but, O my Belibus, I have no confidence in my fellow men. For aught I know there may be a traitor for every gate that pierces our walls, willing and ready to open them for the enemy. Our force is sufficient to prevent the enemy breaking in, but once a traitor lets him in we are powerless. Why think, we haven't an hundred men to a gate."

"I know it, and the thought well nigh destroys my courage. This helplessness is sufficient to unnerve a man."

"Right, Belibus, but it shall not unnerve we two. We will be the last to surrender. As long as resistance availeth we two will resist."

"We will not bend our knees to Cyrus, the tyrant."

"Hold, Belibus," said the prince quickly, "that name becomes him not. Never lived there nobler enemy."

"Thou knowest him?"

"Yea and so dost thou, Belibus."

"Nay, sir, thou art mistaken," replied the soldier, who had not seen the rescue of Sheshbazzar at Sippara.

"I say unto thee, Belibus, thou hast both spoken and eaten with Cyrus, King of Persia."

The prince smiled at Belibus's bewilderment. After enjoying it a moment he enlightened him.

"Rememberest thou not the spearman who saved me from the lion out yonder on the desert?"

"Rastagus?" cried Belibus.

"The man," replied the prince.

"*He* is Cyrus, King of Persia?" asked Belibus, unable to believe the information.

"The same, called by some the Conqueror of the World."

"And I fear that world will include Babylon," said Belibus.

"I fear so, but not if we can prevent it," said the prince soberly.

Further conversation was prevented for the moment by the entrance of a messenger from Belshazzar. He presented an invitation for the two soldiers to attend a great banquet in the palace that evening. The day was the annual feast of Tammuz and everywhere in the city were celebrations and feastings. Sheshbazzar read the message through in silence and handed it to Belibus without comment. The other read it also. As he finished reading he looked up and their eyes met. Each read the other's answer. The prince turned to the servant and dismissed him.

"A pretty time for his feasting!" exclaimed Belibus, almost before the servant was out of hearing.

"What could Nabonidos have been thinking of when he ordered the army to Borsippa?" exclaimed the prince.

"With that army behind these walls we might hope to tire Cyrus out," he continued.

"Shalt thou attend the banquet?" asked Belibus.

"Nay, but I wish thou wouldst go," replied the prince.

"I will go if such are thy orders, but I would prefer staying away," said Belibus.

"I ask thee to go but give no commands. I desire to receive a report of what takes place at the banquet. I would go myself but I have other affairs demanding my attention tonight."

Consequently at the appointed hour upon the evening of that

eventful day, Belibus attired as became a man of his position, left for the palace. He bade Sheshbazzar farewell reluctantly. Had he consulted his own inclination his presence would never have graced Belshazzar's feast, but to him a request was a command.

Immediately after the departure of Belibus, Sheshbazzar attired himself in a simple military costume and armed himself with two daggers and the same heavy sword that he had wielded at Sippara. His attire complete he quietly left the old palace, seen only by the single soldier on guard at the entrance and started on a brisk walk across the city. He continued in the direction he first took until his headquarters were out of sight. Then he doubled on his tracks, this time heading for the river bank. At the street nearest the river he turned north and continued his journey, keeping parallel with the river's course. He walked briskly as a man who has business on hand. Had he business not connected with the city's defence? What man whose sweetheart was imprisoned he knew not where would not neglect his duty for one brief evening in order to learn something concerning her? For Sheshbazzar had a clue, though a very faint one, as to the location of Orma's prison, and he was now bent on learning more. In order to be free to carry on this expedition he had desired Belibus to attend the banquet.

It happened upon the morning of this very day that a servant from the palace had been admitted to his presence and requested a private interview. The prince requested Belibus and a soldier who was present to withdraw. After they were gone the following conversation took place.

"Sir," said the servant, "thou knowest the location of the Wine Quay upon the eastern bank of the river?"

"I do," answered the prince, after a moment's reflection.

"I shall be there tonight in charge of the wines for the king's banquet. Come to me there and I will reveal unto thee the whereabouts of a certain Jewish maiden."

"But why canst thou not give me the information here and now?" asked the prince.

"Because, sir, I cannot direct thee in such a manner as would enable thee to find her alone; but tonight, after the wine has all been hoisted into the palace, I can conduct thee to the place."

Sheshbazzar eyed the fellow suspiciously but he seemed straightforward and honest and the prince believed him.

So while Belshazzar and his nobles feasted Sheshbazzar was seeking the Wine Quay, where the palace wine bins were located. After crossing the river by means of a boat, the prince turned down a narrow lane that skirted the palace mound and led down to the quays beneath it where the palace supplies were received. First he passed the Meat Quay and then the Grain Quay. Next came the one he sought. He could not miss it, for a small lamp burned over the door leading into the wine vaults. He stepped through the low doorway and stopped a moment to listen before proceeding farther. He was in a long vaulted passage that led directly into the wine chambers hollowed out in the very heart of the huge mound upon whose surface the palace was built.

The first feeling of doubt came over him. If he had an enemy who wished him ill now was that enemy's opportunity. Here a quick flash of a knife, a groan, the dragging of a body over the pavement, a splash and all would be over with none to bear witness. He waited before venturing into the long passage, thinking the servant would come to the entrance. At length hearing nothing he decided to run what risk there might be and proceeded along the passage to the vaults where he knew the man would be at work.

He advanced cautiously, keeping close to one of the walls and moving in a half-sideways manner that he might look in both directions. He was surprised at himself. Usually he was a fearless man but this night he seemed to have lost confidence. Every corner held an assassin, every shadow seemed a crouching figure, but still he kept on, determined to risk everything that he might obtain news of Orma. The servant who was to

give that information he had never seen until that morning but still he had confidence in him. At each turn in the passage he stopped and listened. All was quiet save for the faint ripple of the river. He suddenly thought this quietness to be strange. If a man was working yonder amid the wine sacks why did he make no noise?

The prince stopped as this thought came to him. His mind dwelt upon the banquets he had attended in the palace and he strove to remember the mode of handling wine upon those occasions. Suddenly his mind reverted to Belshazzar's coronation banquet and an incident connected with it. He now remembered clearly that when he was called away from the banquet by the queen's message the servant conducted him through a serving room, and he remembered that room to have been filled with wine sacks which the servants were emptying into jars and vessels. Therefore the wine was taken from the vaults before the banquet began, probably in the daytime!

He now felt certain a trap had been laid for him and he determined to save himself if it was not too late. He began to retrace his steps toward the entrance. Slowly and cautiously he felt his way along the damp walls, moving in a shuffling manner that his footsteps would cause no sound in the echoing passage. He was cool but no man in his position could prevent a certain feeling of nervousness coming over him. He was in a dark passage far away from the outside world and perhaps surrounded by assassins whose numbers he had no means of knowing. With his right hand he felt along the walls, in the left he carried one unsheathed dagger and held the other in his teeth that he might grasp it instantly should it be needed.

Thus slowly he made his way back through the passage toward the door now becoming visible by the faint rays of the light burning above it. Just before reaching the entrance he stopped again to listen. All was still. Even the ripple of the mighty waters seemed hushed. He began to hope there was yet time for him to escape ere the assassin, if there was one, should appear. Stop, Sheshbazzar! What hearest thou? Lis-

ten! Stealthy footsteps approach! Back man for thy life! Crouch deep in the shadow if thou desirest to behold thy friends again!

Through the dimly lighted doorway he saw two men approach, one armed with a sword, the other with a battle-axe.

"Ha," he thought, "they honor me by sending two."

"Is he here?" he heard one of the men ask.

"He must be. He passed around the mound nearly a half hour ago."

"Was he armed?"

"He was, with a sword."

The questioner growled, "He's a dangerous man with a sword."

"Yea, in a fair fight he is, but this is not a fair fight."

"Thou likest not the job?"

"Nay, nor dost thou. I've nothing against the man. He has never injured me."

"Then let's clear out."

"And get our throats cut for our pains. No Pantam, it's either he or us and I love myself the better. Then, think of the reward!"

During this low spoken conversation they were standing just within the doorway, but now they had gathered the resolution for the deed and started forward. Sheshbazzar removed the dagger from his mouth and awaited their coming. There would be death here tonight!

In a moment they were close to him. One brushed against him and turned quickly. There was a cry and a struggle. One man went down but the struggle continued. It was life and death, but it was now a fair fight, man to man, with the chances against the prince, for Sheshbazzar, those arms that encircle thee are the strongest in Babylon. Back and forth, round and round they struggle, each watching a chance to strike. First one has the advantage and then the other. The only witness is dead, pierced to the heart by the sure thrust of the prince's dagger, but though dead he is still a participant in

the struggle and he it is who decides it. Sheshbazzar felt himself weakening and knew he must win at once if at all. He threw his whole weight forward and then jumped quickly backward, thus freeing himself from his antagonist's embrace. The advantage was only momentary. The ruffian came for him again in an instant, but as he stepped forward one foot caught in his dead companion's gown and he fell to the floor. Quick as a flash Sheshbazzar drew his sword and before the fellow could rise, the prince was standing over him. He placed one foot upon the prostrate man's chest and was prepared to thrust the sword home.

"Spare me," begged the man.

"Who are thou come here upon such an errand?" asked the prince.

"I am Shemakin," he answered humbly.

"Ha, Shemakin, this is our third meeting. Once thou betrayed me and twice hast thou attempted my life and I know of no reason why I should not rid the world of thee. It would be the better by one villain less."

"For the love of Babylon spare me," begged the frightened man.

"Why for the love of Babylon?"

"Because, sir, I can tell thee of something affecting the very life of the city."

"Speak at once."

"Nay, not when thy sword is so sharp against my throat."

The prince raised his sword a trifle but he remained prepared to give a quick and fatal thrust.

"Now, Shemakin, speak out or I plunge this sword into thy treacherous carcass."

"Know then, Prince, the river gates are open tonight."

The prince staggered backward and had the prostrate villain been quick he could have regained his feet, but it was only a moment until Shemakin felt the sword at his throat again.

"Tell me all," commanded the prince.

"I know but little, but on that little hangs the fate of the

city. Vulmaran has opened the river gates that the Persians may enter."

"They have no boats."

"Nay, sir, but they have shovels and two hours with that tool in the hands of many will open the old canal that was dammed up when the Shebil was dug. This will throw the river waters into the canal and they will flow down through the Yapur Shapu (great reservoir) and the lower canal, reentering their own bed below the city. If thou doubtest me, sir, step outside and look upon the river. See thou how deep the waters are. Go, fear me no more. Thou hast spared my life and henceforth I am thy friend."

The repentant murderer spoke earnestly, convincing the prince of his sincerity. The latter passed out through the doorway to the quay and stood leaning against a buttress of the palace mound, gazing down upon the river. The mighty Euphrates had surely dwindled! From a swift, deep stream, rushing onward impatient to escape from its brick prison, it had become a sickly brook, feebly crawling upon its muddy bottom. Already men could walk upon its bed. Shemakin came and stood beside him.

"Shemakin, canst thou close the south gates while I go to the north?" asked the prince.

The man smiled at the question.

"Why," he answered, "it would take ten men to close the gates. Besides now that the river has been diverted they can come in under the gates."

"Then why was it necessary for Vulmaran to open them?"

"That I know not, unless Cyrus feared the waters would disobey his will."

The prince turned away, sick and faint at heart. The very ground seemed giving way beneath him. He felt himself alone and powerless to avert the impending catastrophe. He alone knew of the treachery and he alone must take steps to resist the Persians. The impulse to fight them at every street corner came to him and he turned to depart, intending to call his forces

together. He walked rapidly across the quay and up through the narrow lane. Before the realization of his burden and responsibility all remembrances of Shemakin faded away. As the prince turned into the street a group of soldiers passed him, reeling and maudlin. His heart sank within him and again he was on the point of giving up. He was alone, not only against the Persians but also against the inaction and debauchery of the city itself.

He hurried onward, over the drawbridge and down the opposite bank of the river. At the first street he turned, passing down a lane that led to the river bank. He entered a small doorway in the wall and stood in the shadow gazing down into the nearly dry bed of the stream. There was no longer even a brook, only a few scattered pools with tiny rivulets connecting them. He glanced up at the sky. It was dark and lowering, and scarcely a star was to be seen. Fit night for a nation's overthrow!

As he stood leaning against the wall, he chanced to look down again into the vacant canal where once a mighty river flowed. He fancied he saw a shadow. A moment later he heard a dull thud as the top of a ladder struck the wall. He looked again more sharply than before. Even through the gloom he could see a man climb up the ladder. Another followed and another. One by one he saw the dim ghostly figures rise from the blackness and gather in a knot upon the quay below him. He stood transfixed and helpless, his very vitality undermined by the sense of overwhelming defeat. He realized that he was too late. Nothing that he could do would stem the rising tide. He remained watching them as stealthily, silently they emerged from the gloom, clambered up the ladders and formed columns upon the embankment. He pressed closer into the projecting angle and watched them spellbound. It was uncanny, spectral, this quiet ghostly entrance of a conquering army. He barely realized its significance.

He could hear the steady splash, splash of many footsteps as column after column passed him to enter the streets at points

farther up the stream. He continued standing in the same position for more than an hour. During all that time a steady stream of eerie figures emerged, apparently from nowhere and formed themselves into serried ranks. At last he heard a low spoken word of command, and a crash as a street gate gave way before the heavy ram. In another moment he heard the steady tramp, tramp of many feet as the column nearest him got under way. They were starting upon their career of blood, booty and lust. The thought stirred him to action, for on the instant came the remembrance of the banquet at the palace. Without an instant's hesitation he ran up the quay, through the small doorway and up the street toward the drawbridge. He hoped to reach the palace in time to convey a warning to the guests.

CHAPTER XLII

BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST

Shortly before the hour set for the commencement of Belshazzar's famous banquet the young soldier Belibus quietly entered the great hall. He took up his station near the entrance where half hidden by the huge draperies he could gaze upon the wonderful scene before him. This was the young king's first attempt at entertaining on his own account and he was determined his banquet should exceed in magnificence anything in that line his father had ever attempted. To this end the thousand employes of the royal establishment had been laboring incessantly for several days. The arts of the decorators, the skill of the cooks, the care of the wine-tenders and the genius of the musicians all contributed to a result at once magnificent and pleasing.

All men of note in the city, whatever their politics or beliefs, had been bidden to the feast. Priests, nobles, soldiers and the wealthiest of the business men all had received the tiny clay

tablet of invitation.* Belibus stood quietly in his corner viewing the hall, its sumptuous decorations and fittings and the guests. The tables, four in number, ran the entire length of the room and were so near together as to leave only a narrow lane between them for the servants to pass through as they waited upon the guests. Gaudy draperies hung in graceful festoons from the paneled ceiling. Plants and flowers were raised in banks of beauty along the walls and small nosegays of blossoms graced the tables. The utensils were all of gold and silver. Light was supplied by myriads of small lamps set wherever a space afforded them room. Filled as was the room with gaily attired noblemen who lent to the scene a kaleidoscopic air of ever-changing color, it was a sight worth beholding.

The guests were standing about in groups awaiting the signal to be seated. Few of them were known to the young soldier who was of humble birth, his present position due entirely to his own exertions. There standing in a group were Neboakhu, Egibi the Hebrew banker, and Nebuzaradan, the old Babylonian general and the only living officer of that wonderful army with which the great Nebuchadnezzar overran all Asia. On the opposite side of the hall was a company of students from the temple, while grouped about Belshazzar at the head of the central table were the dissolute young nobles he had gathered about him since his father's departure. Belibus felt himself alone. Scarcely a man in the whole assemblage was personally known to him. Spent as had been his life in

* Daniel informs us there were a thousand present and, as he is our only authority, we must accept his statement, allowing only for his applying that term merely to express a large company rather than to indicate any specific number of persons. Knowing as we do that the bulk of the army and therefore its officers was absent from the city at the time it seems scarcely probable that a thousand persons (according to our meaning of the term) of rank entitling them to sit at meat with royalty could be gathered together. However it is possible that Belshazzar, in order to ingratiate himself with the masses, had invited many of low birth. The fact of his sending out of the hall for the wise men shows they were not present and they constituted a considerable class.

camps and campaigning, he had had little opportunity for mingling in society.

Gradually the numbers of the guests increased. A steady stream of richly attired men poured through the great arched entrance to the hall. At last Belshazzar left the raised dais upon which he had been sitting and advanced to the table. His action was a signal for the guests to seek their places. It required some moments to assign the guests to seats according to their rank. By this assignment Belibus was placed well toward the foot of the largest table, the one at whose head was placed the king's richly carved chair. When all was ready Belshazzar seated himself, a signal for the guests to do likewise. The banquet was served immediately. Course followed course in rapid succession, the viands covering the entire range of food supplies obtainable, from huge joints of auroch meat to pies filled with the tiniest of birds. Fish, meat, vegetables, fruit, all varieties of edible things were represented and with the material at their disposal the cooks had worked wonders.

After the remains of the last course had been removed came the host of wine servers bearing huge vessels upon their shoulders. Soon the delicious beverages were flowing down the throats of the revelers in steady streams. There were few abstainers among them and a few moments after the advent of the wine servers many of those about the tables showed signs of falling victims to the insidious alcohol. Particularly the king showed unmistakable signs of intoxication. He was rapidly becoming maudlin. Now was the time for singing and dancing. As a special attraction the king's harem came in as a body and danced before the guests, accompanying their motions with a weird chant, interspersed with lewd songs. Belshazzar, leaning on the arm of a favorite, watched the scene through the eyes of a drunkard. Suddenly he noticed the wine servers were slow about refilling the empty goblets.

"Be faster with the wine," he cried, interrupting a Susianian girl who was singing a low song and acting out its story as she sang.

"Sir, we are short of vessels," replied the chief servant.

"Then send to the temple and bring hither the gold and silver vessels of the Jews. They have lain in idleness long enough."

"O King, I protest against the use of those vessels," said 'Neboakhu, rising and speaking in a loud voice. "Never have they been touched since coming into our possession. They were used in the Jewish temple and are therefore sacred to their God. The great Nebuchadnezzar himself gave orders that they should never be used."

"Nebuchadnezzar is dead. His orders are no longer obeyed. I am the king and what I say do shall be done. The man who opposes my will shall die. Slave bring the vessels and pay no heed to this mad priest," cried the king.

"The gods help a nation with such a king," murmured Neboakhu as he took his seat.

After a long delay, during which the singing and dancing went on uninterruptedly, the servants appeared bearing the beautiful Hebrew vessels, those made at King Solomon's orders and used in the temple worship from his day until the fall of Jerusalem.

"Fill them up," cried Belshazzar gleefully.

The servants returned in a moment with the sacred vessels filled to the brim with wine. The first man filled the goblet of the king and then the others were served in turn. After all were served Belshazzar arose unsteadily and with cup raised above his head proposed a toast.

"Great is Bel!" he cried, "god of gods and king of kings. Drink to him, drink. Drink confusion to all other gods. Drink, drink to Bel. He is great and Belshazzar is next."

Suddenly the face of the boy king turned ashen pale and his whole body trembled so violently that he could scarcely stand. The hand upholding the goblet so shook that the wine spilled over the edges and fell upon his head, flowing down over his rich robe to the floor. His empty hand pointed to the wall upon his right where his gaze was riveted, fascinated by a

strange apparition. The eyes of the assembled company followed the trembling finger of the king and beheld upon the wall the cause of his confusion. Stranger sight ne'er saw any man.

Upon the whitened wall of the banquet chamber the fingers of a man's hand were distinctly visible as they slowly and carefully traced the letters of a mysterious message in an unknown tongue. The eyes of the thousand guests watched the ghostly fingers as they ran across the wall tracing the mystic characters. The singers and dancers quietly left the room, awed by the strange apparition. Even their seared consciences told them there was here a Divine manifestation and they felt their unfitness to behold it.

At length the eerie fingers finished their work and paused. Belshazzar seemed to recover somewhat from his fright.

"Neboakhu," he cried, "Chief Priest of Babylon, interpret for me the meaning of yonder message from the gods."

With a slow and measured step the old priest approached the king. From a station at Belshazzar's left hand he stood and gazed long at the awesome message. At length with the perfect acting born of long years of deception he turned to the king and confidently interpreted the message for him.

"Thus reads yonder message, O King. The gods are pleased with thy favor. They promise thee their blessing. They promise to defeat the Persians and give the countries of the world into thy hand."

Ah, Neboakhu, deceptive till the last. Thy whole life has been spent deluding people. By tricks and subtleties hast thou led thousands to the worship of gods thou knewest did not exist. Only a few moments ago when yon mysterious hand first appeared upon the wall thou turned to thy companion and said: "I tell thee, friend Egibi, there is something Divine in that message. Behind that hand there is a God and I know and thou knowest it is not the god I worship but the one thou once worshipped and forsook." For once thy pretended knowledge avails thee not. Yonder boy king already has a grudge

against thee and some strange power tells him thou hast sought to deceive him.

"Priest, thou liest. Thou knowest not how yonder message reads," cried the king and before the astonished guests realized what was taking place Belshazzar's sword had ended the life of Babylon's chief priest.

"Send for the seven wise men," he cried, mad with rage and fright.

After a brief delay the Seven Mystic Councillors came clad in their long robes. They marched into the hall in single file and approached the king, moving slowly and with dignity.

"Read for me yonder message," cried the boy.

Long and steadfastly they looked upon it but not one of the seven could decipher a single letter. Truly all things Babylonian were slipping away tonight! At length the seven seers acknowledged their inability to read the strange words and they were curtly dismissed. Belshazzar sat huddled in one corner of the great throne-like chair, one elbow upon an arm and one hand supporting his head. Believing as he did, in common with all his race, in things supernatural, he saw in the glowing words upon the wall a message for himself and he thought it boded ill. Though he dreaded evil tidings he yet felt he must have it translated for him. He sat as one in a reverie.

The curtains that screened the entrance were pushed aside and a figure tall and majestic entered the room. It was the figure of a woman. She was dressed all in white and her face was nearly as white as the garments she wore. She advanced slowly across the hall, not stopping until close beside the king. It was Nitocris, Queen of Babylon, risen from a sick bed to learn the cause of the clamor she had heard throughout the palace.

"My son," she said, "what is the cause of this strange fright which has taken possession of everyone within the palace tonight?"

"Look, Queen, at yonder wall and ask no questions," he answered.

She looked as he indicated and saw for the first time the strange words that glowed upon the opposite wall. She regarded them in silence for several moments, the eyes of the thousand guests fastened upon her pale face. At length turning to her son, she said:

"O King, be not troubled because of yonder words. Let not thy face be pale nor thy knees shake together. There is here in thy kingdom a man who is filled with the spirit of the gods; who can interpret dreams and dissolve difficulties. The great Nebuchadnezzar made him chief of all the wisemen and magicians. Send for this man Daniel, I pray thee, and bid him come hither. He and he alone can interpret this writing for thee."

Having thus spoken she retraced her steps to the doorway and left the room, walking slowly and weakly, showing to the assembled guests how disease had undermined the strength and vitality of this wonderful woman. Messengers were at once sent to find Daniel and after a long delay he came. The chief of the servants at once conducted him to the throne. Belshazzar addressed him.

"I have heard of thee, mighty Daniel, that thou hast the gift of interpreting dreams and making known the mysteries that are unknown to other men. Look thou upon yonder writing upon the wall. The chief priest gave me a false interpretation thereof and he paid for his deception with his life. The wise men, the astrologers of the king were summoned and they could not read it. Now therefore behold and see if thou canst reveal unto me the meaning of yonder words. If thou canst interpret their meaning thou shalt be clothed in a scarlet cloak and a golden chain shall be about thy neck. Thou shalt be our rab mag and rank third in the kingdom."

Daniel answered the king. "Thy gifts and promises are not for me; give them to another, but I will read the writing for thee and make known unto thee the interpretation thereof.

"Know, King Belshazzar, the Most High God gave unto

Nebuchadnezzar a mighty kingdom with all power and honor. He gave the world and its people into his hands to rule according to his own inclination; but when the great king was lifted up in his pride the Lord God took away from him his throne and his glory. He was changed into a beast of the field and dwelt with the beasts. He ate grass like other beasts and his body was wet with dew until he lifted up his voice and acknowledged the Most High to be ruler over all.

"Thou hast heard all this before Belshazzar, but thou hast hardened thy heart and defied the Lord of Heaven. Thou hast had the vessels of the temple brought in here and thou, with thy lords and nobles, thy wives and concubines hast drank wine from them. Thou hast raised up thy voice in praise of false gods; gods of metal and of stone that neither hear nor see, defying the true God, who settest thee upon thy throne and gave the kingdom into thy hand.

"The words written upon the wall are these, Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin and this is the interpretation thereof: Mene, God has reckoned thy kingdom and finished it; Tekel, thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting; Phares, God will break thy kingdom in pieces and give it unto the Medes and Persians."

A deep hush fell upon the assembly when Daniel began to speak. The revelers were sobered by the scene; the sober were pale with fear. As the mighty prophet denounced their king and his crimes against the Lord each took the words unto himself and when he foretold their city's doom they believed him. It was some moments after Daniel finished before Belshazzar found words to answer him and when he did speak his words little showed the feeling engendered within him by the prophet's speech.

"Thy words bring sadness to my heart, mighty Daniel," he said, "but I shall keep my word which I spake unto thee. Bring hither a scarlet garment and a golden chain."

Servants soon brought the articles and put them upon Daniel. Belshazzar then arose and addressed his guests.

"Men of Babylon," he said, "behold before thee, Daniel who is called Belteshazzar, rab mag of Babylon."

Before the king seated himself after declaring Daniel's elevation the curtains that screened the entrance were suddenly pushed aside and a man sprang into the hall. At sight of him Belshazzar turned deathly pale.

"The Persians are within the city and all is lost," he cried.

The newcomer was Sheshbazzar. He advanced up the hall in long strides until he reached the throne. Belshazzar shrank farther into his seat at sight of the man whom he supposed already killed by the hired assassins he had sent against him. The prince grasped the king by the throat and lifted him to his feet.

"By all the gods, Belshazzar, tell me where thou hast hidden the woman of my heart," he hissed.

Several guests arose to go to the king's assistance. They recognized the newcomer as flesh and blood and it was a relief after the supernatural occurrences of the evening. Sheshbazzar saw them coming and waved them back with his free arm.

"Back, men of Babylon," he cried, "this quarrel is between Belshazzar and myself alone."

Then tightening his grip upon the king's throat he cried again:

"Answer me quick ere I kill thee."

"She is in the palace. South building. The servants will show thee," gasped the king.

The prince gave him a push backwards and would have left him thus had not his eyes chanced to rest upon the corpse of Neboakhu which had not been removed but lay where he had fallen. Quick as a flash Sheshbazzar's sword was in the air prepared to strike the avenging blow, but in that instant a hand was placed upon his arm and a calm voice said: "My son, stain not thy clean hands with unrighteous blood."

Sheshbazzar turned to the speaker and, recognizing him, replied: "Thou are right, mighty Daniel, such blood as his is too vile for an honest sword."

"'Tis not too vile for mine," screamed a voice near at hand.

There was a flash in the air, a cry and Belshazzar lay in his own blood upon the steps of his throne.

"Nabonidos, I am avenged," cried the voice and Vulmaran fell back into the arms of the aroused nobles, a hopeless maniac.

"Sirs," cried a voice, loud and stern, "ye are my prisoners."

All turned toward the entrance from whence came the voice. Just inside the curtains stood Gobryas, the general of Cyrus. Beside him stood Heber and behind Heber was a column of soldiers.

Thus passed away the great empire of Babylon after a life of only eighty-seven years. Thus the achievements of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar were lost through the inaction and debauchery of their successors. Thus fell the Semitic race and thus rose the Aryan. The Almighty had made another move upon the Divine chess-board.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE MORNING AFTER

The morning's sun dawned upon a stricken city; a city of corpses; of outraged womanhood; of devastated homes. Murder, rape and arson, the dread triumvirate of conquest had held full sway over the once proud mistress of the East. Notwithstanding the strict orders issued by King Cyrus, his officers had found it impossible to restrain their rough men who for years had looked eagerly forward to the loot of Babylon, and when their prey was actually within their grasp, no orders could prevent their securing all the booty obtainable. Of the three afflictions, fire had done the least harm, not due to the lack of its employment but to Babylon's being entirely a brick city. In the flat treeless country of the lower Euphrates wood was the most expensive and least used building material. To this fact alone was due the city's preservation from fire.

Trustworthy troops had been placed about the palace, the temple, the gardens and other public edifices. Cyrus hoped to retain Babylon in all its magnificence and therefore took these steps to prevent its destruction. In accordance with his humane policy all the guests at Belshazzar's feast escaped with their lives and liberty. Early in the morning, after the terrible hours of the night were over, and the debauched soldiers had sought quarters for themselves or been rounded up by their officers, Gobryas opened wide the palace gates and sent forth the nobles to their respective homes. Alas, such homes as many of them found. Wives and daughters murdered or outraged, in many cases both, the beautiful tapestries torn from their places and carried away, the furnitures broken, the servants fled.

Sheshbazzar had been obliged to spend the night at the palace with the nobles. Though the young Persian had been both courteous and gentle, he was yet firm, and not one whom he found in the banquet hall had been allowed to leave the building until daylight. The bodies of Neboakhu and Belshazzar had been removed to an adjoining room where slaves had prepared them for burial. Thus the murderer and his victim departed life in the same hour. Vulmaran had been taken into custody to restrain him from further violence. The once active mind was shattered. No longer would the once powerful rab mag rule kings or carry on conspiracies. To languish and pine in a mad cell, to rave and cry of his royal ambitions, was the fate of the wily noble. Sheshbazzar experienced a pang at heart upon beholding him led away to his cell, for notwithstanding the injuries he had received at the man's hands he could not forget whose father the maniac was.

As soon as the gates were opened in the morning, Sheshbazzar left the palace. He was sorrowful, mourning for the dear old man who had been to him the only father he had ever known. He went at once to his old home behind the temple. The ravages of the conquerors had not reached that part of the city and he found the house just as it was when its occupant left to attend Belshazzar's feast. The prince bade the servants make

ready to receive the body of their master. Then he ordered his chariot and sat down in the dead priest's library to await its coming. Abstractedly he picked up a large clay tablet that lay upon the table and began to read the characters engraved upon it. To his surprise he found it directed to himself. Glancing across it he found it to be of some length and knowing he had but a few moments to wait, he laid it back upon the table, resolving to read it later when time was not so pressing.

A moment later a servant announced the presence of his chariot and he at once left the house. At the Hanging Gardens the chariot stopped and the prince alighted. He hurried up the several flights of stairs to the summit. He boldly entered the villa and sought out Maraida. He no longer had enemies to fear and therefore went upon his present business boldly. After much argument he prevailed upon the woman to accompany him. It was not until he told of Orma's second imprisonment and his desire to have her assist in rescuing the girl, that Maraida consented to leave. He also narrated to her the occurrence of the previous night. In her secluded position only the barest rumors of the momentous happenings reached her. The unfortunate woman's heart leaped as he progressed with the narrative and she slowly realized that her life of slavery was at an end. For the first time in over twenty years she was her own mistress. The villa upon the Hanging Gardens was not the main harem but only the residence of a few favorites and therefore Maraida was not among those whom Belshazzar had introduced at his banquet.

Once they reached the palace, the rescue of Orma was merely the work of moments, moments required for inquiry, for once the cell was located there were none to prevent their leading her forth. A servant was found who knew of her prison and encouraged by a golden brooch given him by the prince, he led the way to the cell. The prince opened the door and bade Maraida enter. Orma started toward them but ere her steps placed her near them, she tottered and had not the prince sprang forward to catch her, she would have fallen. She lay

back in his arms limp and apparently lifeless. He sent the servant scurrying after water and bade Maraida loosen her clothing. She obeyed and afterwards struck the hands of the fainting girl. In a few moments the servant returned with a dish of water. They sprinkled her face and forced a swallow between her closed lips. Soon she opened her eyes and smiled, a poor weak smile. In a few moments she returned to full consciousness but was very weak.

"Orma, my love," said the prince, "thy troubles are over. Belshazzar is slain and Cyrus is in possession of the city. Thy lover is no longer a prince but a common man, and for all I know a servant to the Persian."

She smiled upon him in a manner that told plainer than words that his loss of rank had no effect upon her, that she loved the man and not the title. As he glanced around the room a hot wave of anger passed over him, the undertow leaving him calmly indignant. There was not a covering on the floor, not a drapery to the window, not an article of furniture in the room, not even a chair. She told him that during her three days' imprisonment not a morsel of food nor a drop of water passed her lips. Small wonder the poor girl fainted!

The prince and Maraida took each an arm and thus supported Orma through the halls and corridors to the small private door where the chariot awaited them. Her lame ankle was still painful but by bearing little weight upon it she was able to walk between them. The prince took her in his arms and tenderly placed her upon the floor of the vehicle. Then he and Maraida climbed up beside her. Shortly before noon they stopped before Nehum's residence. As they alighted Orma turned to the former concubine and said kindly: "Here is my abode, Maraida, and here shalt thou reside. Wherever I am hereafter, there shalt be thy home."

Sheshbazzar accompanied them into the house. The reunion of the Jewish family was touching. The prince held aloof with averted gaze until the first effusive greetings were over. Then

as Orma and Maraida left the room to obtain some food, Nehum and Heber turned to him.

"Prince!" exclaimed the old man, "again do I owe thee my heartfelt gratitude. Again am I indebted to thee for restoring my daughter unto me. I would that I could reward thee according to thy desires but thou knowest my objection. However, I am deeply grateful and nothing but my one objection prevents me welcoming thee into my family as an honored son."

"For thy good wishes I thank thee," replied Sheshbazzar, a marked tone of displeasure in his voice. The subject was a distasteful one and Nehum's constant recurrence to it aggravated him. Nehum noticed the constraint he showed and hastened to speak again.

"Thou art displeased with what thou termest an old man's whim, I regret giving thee offence, but thou canst not realize how near to my heart is this matter." He was so earnest that the tears welled from his eyes and flowed down his cheeks.

"Good Nehum, it gives me sorrow to cause thee pain but my religion is as sacred to me as is thine to thee. If thou wert in my place thou wouldst not give up Jehovah for Bel even to win the sweetest woman in the world," replied the prince.

"Thou art right, Prince," answered the old man. "Even in my sorrow that so noble a man should choose to remain an idolater, I can but respect thee for thy consistency. Far better is it to be true in thy worship of a false god than a hypocrite in worshipping the true One."

The prince bowed slightly in recognition of the genuine compliment contained in the old man's speech.

"One thing would I ask thee," he said a moment later. "Dost thou still forbid my seeing thy daughter?"

"Ah, that is a difficult question. My natural respect for thee and my gratitude for thy many services to us commend me to make thee welcome here at all times, but on the other hand, if my daughter and thee are not to wed 'twere better thou didst not meet."

He was silent for several moments apparently in deep thought. At length he spoke.

"I cannot find the words to forbid thee visiting here and meeting my daughter. Therefore, I bid thee come and I shall pray for thee yet more earnestly."

The prince smiled at the idea of the old man praying for him, but thanked him heartily for his permission to visit Orma. After a few words with Heber concerning the presence of the Persians he departed.

From the residence of Nehum he was driven directly to the temple. This question of religion troubled him far more than he would admit even to himself. Doubts as to the genuineness of his gods continually assailed him, but he determinedly put them aside. Never had he been a religious man in the accepted sense of the term. His life had been too full of action to allow of his hanging about the temple or even meditating upon matters religious, although his early years had been spent under Neboakhu's tuition. The old priest, however, had seldom taught him on religious subjects, trusting the young man to follow blindly in the faith of his people. Since meeting Orma the prince had studied and meditated upon the subject more than during his entire previous life. The complete change in Iddin's life had been a revelation unto him and from that life dated the first of his doubts concerning the divinity of Bel and his associates.

Upon arriving at the temple he made the weary ascent of its seven stages and entered the golden roofed shrine on its summit. His heart was full and like many another in his hour of troubles he turned to his sanctuary. Prostrating himself before the great golden image of Bel he gave way completely to the grief and despair that filled him, feelings he had hitherto restrained.

"Oh my lord Bel," he cried, passionately holding out his arms in supplication, "take me to thyself. This world contains nothing more to live for. My cause is forever lost, my country is in the hands of a foreigner, my good old father, thy ser-

vant, murdered, and I cannot wed the woman of my heart without forsaking thee.

"All hope is gone; and without hope, O Bel, life is as a dreary desert, void and empty. My cup of bitterness is full to overflowing. I have no country and no home. I am doomed to wander through the world without a place to lay my head. No hope or comfort lies ahead. No ambition remains to spur me on. The object of my life is gone. I long for action but all fields of action are closed against me. I live with only a grave to look forward to.

"O Bel, comfort me. Remove this load of bitterness from my heart. Help me to throw off this despair and be again a man. Find me some work in life to accomplish, some ambition to live for, some goal to reach. Strengthen my faith in thee, O Bel. Remove these doubts that now assail me. Help me to remain thy true follower. I have no friends, O Bel—"

"For shame, Sheshbazzar, thou hast many friends, one of whom stands ready to help thee," said a voice behind him.

The prince hesitated and then arose, half angry at the interruption, half ashamed that anyone should hear his words of despair. He was not especially surprised to find that the interruption came from King Cyrus.*

"Prince Sheshbazzar," said the conqueror, "I crave thy pardon for this intrusion. When I conquer a nation it is my policy to adopt its gods. Therefore am I here this morning to make the acquaintance of the latest additions to my list of deities."

These words were spoken in careless flippant tones, showing a total lack of veneration upon the conqueror's part. Sheshbazzar noticed the tone and took exception to it.

"Thou believest not in our gods?" he said.

"I do not," replied Cyrus, "and neither, I hope, dost thou."

* The writer is here guilty of an historical inaccuracy. While Babylon was captured by Gobryas in June, B. C. 538, modern research proves the conqueror himself did not enter the city until October. For the purposes of this tale the writer has taken the liberty of introducing Cyrus within the walls immediately after the capture.

"In that ye err," answered the prince, "I believe in them with all—" He did not finish. Truthfulness was one of his chief virtues and he could not truthfully say he believed in these gods with all *his* heart.

"Prince," said King Cyrus, "I am a man who gives little heed to matters religious. Cyrus is the god I worship and in truth he has been good to me. Of one thing I now feel certain. There is a Supreme Being who rules this world and one alone. Various peoples have dim perceptions of him, but it is the Hebrews, these people now captive in this land, who have the clearest view, a view given them by the greatest prophets our world has known. Dost thou know, Sheshbazzar, one of those prophets foretells my life and even names me Cyrus? * I once told thee I felt impelled to take this country and add it to my empire. More than this, I now tell thee I have had orders from the Great God himself, telling me he would give the city into my hands without a blow being struck and thou seest it has been so. He also commanded me to return the captive Jews to their own land."

The great king was silent for some moments. His head was bowed and he stroked his beard thoughtfully. When at last he spoke it was with the manner of a man who has decided the question troubling him.

"Prince Sheshbazzar, since taking this city my mind has dwelt continually upon thee and of my duty concerning thee. The only regret I have at overthrowing this kingdom is the wrong done thee thereby. As I once told thee, were it not for my firm belief in Divine commands I would have withdrawn and left thee thy throne. I even offered thee that throne but under such conditions I honored thee for refusing my offer. This day would I appoint thee Governor of Babylonia, but I know full well thy pride would prevent thy accepting it. A moment since, however, a thought came to me and I hasten to place it before thee.

"It is my intention to return the Jews to their own land. I

* Isaiah 44:28—45:1-4.

want someone to return with them as their leader and act as Governor of Judea. Therefore, Prince Sheshbazzar, I offer thee the post as Governor. What sayest thou?"

The manner of Cyrus's speaking was one of absolute sincerity. His offer was kind and disinterested. The prince pondered over the offer but a few moments and in that time he decided upon his future career.

"King Cyrus," he said, "it would be painful for me to remain in this land now that it is subject to another race. Therefore I accept thy kind offer."

"Then that is settled," said Cyrus.

CHAPTER XLIV

JEHOVAH

Sheshbazzar partook of his noonday meal in solitude. So engrossed was he in his thoughts he paid little heed to his eating, mechanically tasting this dish and that, but all the time oblivious to his surroundings. As he lay back in his chair after finishing the meal a servant entered to announce a caller. The prince arose at once and passed through the library to the reception room where the visitor awaited him. To his surprise he found no less a personage than Bena Egibi, the world's foremost banker. As the young man entered the room the man of finance arose to meet him.

"I must make haste in conducting our business, sir, as I have many important matters to consider today," he said.

The prince motioned the old man to a seat and took one near him. The banker leaned forward and spoke hurriedly and in a low tone.

"I am come," he began, "to make an announcement unto thee that will cause thee some surprise. A few days ago the lamented Neboakhu came to my place of business and dictated to me certain orders regarding the disposition of his property,

little dreaming how soon those orders would be carried out. Therefore am I here to talk the matter over with thee.

"In the first place he orders that his remains be buried in the tomb he has prepared beneath the temple.

"Second: He orders that all moneys of which he is possessed be given unto thee, Sheshbazzar, or as thou wert formerly called, Nabomuran, provided certain conditions to be named hereafter are complied with.

"Third: A certain sum mentioned by him is to be thine in case thou refusest to accept the main fortune upon his conditions. In case of such refusal all save the above sum is to be divided among the priesthood.

"Fourth: This house is the property of the temple and must be vacated at his death. He therefore gives to thee as a residence the palace of Vulmaran."

"The palace of Vulmaran?" exclaimed the prince.

"That edifice is the property of Neboakhu. In order to pay for his luxurious mode of living the former rab mag was forced to pledge his estates and to prevent their being sold his brother bought them."

"His brother?"

"Neboakhu and Vulmaran had the same father though different mothers. I believe I have given thee an epitome of his bequests."

"There were conditions," the prince reminded him.

"Ah yes. The conditions upon which the entire property is to be thine are peculiar, coming as they do from the Chief Priest of Bel. He requires thee to forsake thy present religion and adopt that of the Jews. He obliges thee to devote one-half of the fortune to the Jewish nation to be used in rebuilding their city and temple and lastly he requires thee to make thy home in Jerusalem."

The prince sat looking earnestly into the face of the old banker. That these strange orders came from the deceased priest he could scarcely believe. They were at utter variance with every spoken word of his foster-father.

"Why does he bequeath me a home in Babylon if he requires me to live in Jerusalem?" he asked.

"The third and fourth bequests are conditional upon thy refusal of the second. Knowing thy honesty and steadfastness he expressed doubts as to thy compliance with the conditions attendant upon thy possession of the whole and not wishing such a refusal to make thee a poor man he leaves thee a home and a fortune sufficient to support it."

"I judge the fortune left by Neboakhu is considerable."

"One of the largest in the world; the largest private fortune in Babylon, amounting to about eight hundred talents."

The prince stared at him in astonishment at mention of the vast proportions of the old priest's accumulations.

"How did Neboakhu obtain so vast a fortune?" he asked presently.

The banker smiled at the question.

"He amassed it by economy. Neboakhu, as thou knowest, was a plain liver and therefore he used but a small proportion of his perquisites."

"Of what do these perquisites consist?" asked the prince sharply.

The old man was plainly embarrassed. He felt the prince's black eyes to be penetrating his very soul. He knew full well how his friend had amassed his millions and Sheshbazzar also suspected. The revenues of the temple were enormous and were entirely under the control of the chief priest, with no one to demand an accounting. Thus Neboakhu had been able to amass a fortune of colossal proportions out of the public funds and in a manner not considered dishonest by the majority of the people.

"Thou hast no answer," persisted Sheshbazzar.

The banker fidgeted uneasily in his seat. He wished to defend his old friend but saw no means of doing so to this straightforward young man. At length he framed an evasive reply.

"Be not overscrupulous in this matter. We both know the

chief priests have always amassed fortunes and Neboakhu was but bolder than the rest."

"It is a sad blow to me," answered the prince, "to learn that this man whom I have loved and revered as a father has enriched himself from the gifts enthusiastic worshipers brought to their gods."

"Let not such thoughts as these cost thee a fortune, Sheshbazzar," persisted the banker. "If thou dost not accept of Neboakhu's savings they will go to a pack of thieves who will do no good with them, but in thy hands the gold will reestablish a noble nation, making thy name an honored one through the centuries that are to come. Say thou wilt accept his conditions and his fortune."

"That I will not say, sir," replied the prince, "though I do regret thus turning away the means of doing so much good in the world."

The old banker arose and stood before Sheshbazzar, one hand upon the young man's shoulder and looking earnestly into his face entreated him.

"I beg thee young man decide not thus hastily. Remember in refusing this fortune thou puttest aside the opportunity of establishing a wonderful people in their own land. The hour of their deliverance is at hand. King Cyrus has already announced his intention of allowing them to return and has called a meeting of the Jewish leaders to confer with him. With the help of thy property they can rebuild their city in a magnificent manner, making it one of the most wonderful capitals in the world. Think before refusing to give this oppressed people such assistance."

"Sir," replied the young man gravely, "I feel the heavy responsibility resting upon me and am truly sorrowful in causing the Jewish people to lose so vast a treasure, but I cannot honestly accept this fortune upon the conditions imposed."

"What portion of the conditions stands in thy way?"

"The first. I am willing, yea more, would be glad to bestow half upon the Jewish people, and I have already promised

to go to Jerusalem, but were the fortune of Neboakhu tenfold greater it would yet be too small to buy my conscience, to make me forsake my religion."

The prince spoke in a low calm tone but one so firm as to convince his hearer of his sincerity. The old banker looked troubled. He was extremely desirous of having the young man accept the property.

"Listen to me, Sheshbazzar," he said, "while I tell thee something concerning myself. I was born a Jew but long years ago I forsook my God. I denied His existence. I said there were no gods. For all these years I have lived without religion's balm to heal the wounds and calm the sorrows of life. Take an old man's advice. Forsake these gods of stone and metal and cleave only unto the true God, Jehovah. He is the God I forsook and bitterly have I repented mine action. Now I acknowledge Him and pray to Him but I have sinned against Him so long that He now refuses me His grace and comfort. Forget all other considerations but thine own peace and happiness and seek Jehovah. He will grant unto thee the comfort thine own gods cannot give thee."

"Good Egibi," answered Sheshbazzar solemnly, "I appreciate thy motives, but I cannot, will not, forsake my gods."

"O Bel," he cried rising impetuously, "will this never cease? Will they never cease harassing me about my religion?"

"Of one thing would I remind thee," said the banker as a last resort. "Neboakhu was the wisest of his race; he was the chief exponent of the Babylonian religion; he knew the gods as no other knew them, yet he desired thee to worship Jehovah. I will say no more. Words of mine are unnecessary to add to such evidence. I accept thy decision in regard to this property, but Sheshbazzar, I shall hold every shekel of my old friend's possessions until I am forced to part with them."

With this as his farewell the man of finance departed. When he was again alone the young man arose and passed through into the library. He seated himself beside the table, and throwing his arms upon it, he buried his face in them and

gave way to a bitter grief, a grief that sprang from many causes.

There was his disappointed ambition, sorrow over his country's downfall, the death and what seemed worse, the dishonesty of Neboakhu and now his religious doubts. All combined to cast over his naturally buoyant nature a heavy pall of grief and sorrow, a pall so deep and black as to completely overshadow all other thoughts and emotions. He felt keenly the responsibility he had accepted by turning away from the people of his loved one the fortune that meant to them a national existence and a national worship. As he thought of the thousands who would benefit by the sale of his conscience the temptation to call back his words became almost irresistible. Condemn not this strong man for his adherence to gods and to a religion we know to be false. Remember to him those gods were omnipotent, that religion the one he had been born and bred in.

The tears which flowed freely from his eyes and trickled down upon his clasped hands seemed to calm him somewhat. At length they ceased and he raised his head. He sat silently thoughtful, looking into space, unconscious of his surroundings, unheeding of the passing time. Within his mind a fierce struggle was taking place, the fiercest struggle that ever takes place within a man. The whole theology of Babylon was arrayed within his mind against one bare fact; Neboakhu, chief priest though he was, had desired the young man he loved to become a Jew! If any man of the time had a knowledge of the Babylonian religion, had an acquaintance with the Babylonian pantheon that man was Neboakhu. If then he wished his foster-son to forsake that religion did it mean that the old man himself disbelieved in the gods he served?

Suddenly there flashed into the young man's mind the remembrance of the tablet he had found in the morning. He looked for it upon the table and found it close at hand. He left the room and called to a servant to bring a light. When the lamp was brought he picked up the tablet and

lay back in his chair to read it. The words formed a message from the dead.

To my beloved son, Sheshbazzar:

An old man, drawing near to the end of life, feels called upon to leave a warning to a young one just entering upon his useful years.

As I have long realized thou hast no chance of becoming king. We have sinned far too deeply against the All Ruling One for Him to save us at this late day. Our nation is doomed to pass away and be swallowed up in the empire of the Persian. This I have long seen coming as I have studied the destinies of the world as outlined in the stars; but out of the empire of the Persian I can see a star appear that ever grows in size and brilliancy until its rays shine round the world illuminating all peoples. Whenever I look I can see this star but I cannot explain its significance. Only this: It always stands over the land of Judea and from this point as a center its effulgent light spreads out over all humanity. Out of Judea then, my son, will come one who shall rule the world. I have read the Jewish writings and they point to the coming of a mighty ruler who shall conquer the world. Why my son, has this now dispersed nation been selected to furnish the coming leader? There can be but one explanation. It is because they and they alone worship the True God; because of all peoples on earth they alone have read aright the teachings of the world. Why this people, little versed in science or art, without the least instinct of empire, should have acquired so great and true a knowledge of the Deity I cannot say, unless God chose to reveal himself directly unto them.

I feel my son, that my life has not been wasted if my years of thought and study have enabled me to discover but this one truth. I am sure of my discovery. My very soul tells me I am right in my belief. Therefore, my son, fear not to follow in this path. Forsake then the false gods of inanimate stone and metal and cleave only unto the one God, Jehovah of the Hebrews.

In my library thou wilt find copies of the Jewish writings.

Read them and ponder over their teachings. In them is life and happiness. Without a true conception of God a man is like a ship without a helm or a traveler lost upon the desert.

The writing broke short off here as if the old priest had been called away from his task and had never returned to it. Thou hast written enough, Neboakhu. Thy words carry conviction to a doubting heart.

Sheshbazzar replaced the tablet upon the table and arose to pace the room. His mind was filled with conflicting emotions. The life of Iddin and the change in it, the words of Cyrus, the sorrow of Egibi over his lost religion and now the sober argument of Neboakhu all contributed to this result.

"O God help me!" he cried.

Suddenly as he was walking up and down the room a great wave of happiness filled his soul and into his face there came an expression of unearthly joy, for a Father's love had shed itself over him and claimed him as His child. The joy that filled his heart, welled up into his voice and he cried out: "I believe! I believe! Lord God help me!"

Then as if acting under a Divine inspiration he knelt down to pray. At that moment his steps had placed him before an open window and he knelt where he stood. Thou knowest it not, Sheshbazzar, but the Unseen Power hath led thy footsteps hither and placed thee in due position to pray. Thy window is open toward Jerusalem!

His prayer was as the bathing of Naaman. As the waters of Jordan forever removed from the Syrian chieftain all traces of his leprosy, so the prayer of Sheshbazzar, bathing him in the Spirit of God, removed all his old idolatry, his selfishness, his pride. Gone forever were Bel, Merodach and their train and in their place one God ruled alone. He arose from his knees a new man, his heart filled with an everlasting peace, his soul uplifted and purified.

At that moment a servant entered the room and called him. Without the door stood a messenger from the palace.

"The Queen is dying and bids thee come to her at once," said the man.

The sad announcement struck deep into the prince's soul, coming as it did so soon after his change of heart. He prepared to accompany the man at once.

CHAPTER XLV

THE DEATH OF NITOCRIS

With a sad heart Prince Sheshbazzar entered the death chamber of Babylon's queen. He secretly upbraided himself for not having visited her before, but as he reviewed the events of the past few days he was comforted by realizing how impossible it had been for him to find the necessary time, and in addition he had not known of her serious illness. Aside from a certain indefinable lassitude she had appeared in perfect health upon the occasion of the family breakfast the morning he galloped into Babylon the bearer of ill tidings. Still, he now remembered she had informed him more than a year ago of the disease she knew to be undermining her strength. Notwithstanding the way in which events had crowded themselves upon him since his return from the desert, he asked himself if, by a trifle extra exertion, he could not have made himself more of a comfort to his unhappy queen-mother.

He found the chamber quiet, a dim light barely illuminating the objects in the room sufficiently to prevent the newcomer, fresh from the glare of the palace halls, from stumbling over them. In a farther corner of the spacious apartment stood a low couch with snowy covers and draperies. About the couch knelt three persons whom the prince recognized as Halista, Belibus and King Cyrus. With a pang he gazed upon the pale face on the pillow, more beautiful even in its lack of color than when filled with the ruddy glow of health. All the light of intense emotions that usually illumined it

was gone and in its place was the classic refinement always visible upon the face of a noble woman. Without a word or sign to the other spectators of this, the saddest sight a son can look upon, he knelt beside the couch and took one pale hand in his. At the moment of his entrance the queen was talking with King Cyrus in a low tone, her speech constantly interrupted by paroxysms of pain. As unflinchingly this wonderful woman had borne the pains and sorrows of life, so with never a cry nor groan, she bore the unspeakable anguish of death. Coma, the friend of the dying, which as a merciful physician closes the eyes and lulls the sensibilities, bridging the awful chasm that lies between this life and the next, was absent from this bedside. Nor had narcotic drugs, which in our day save the dying so much of the agony of dissolution, been dreamed of.

With set teeth and clenched hands she lay immovable, only the twitchings of the facial muscles revealing the intensity of her suffering, until the pain, relenting for a brief period, she again turned to the conqueror and continued her speech with him. Secretly the prince was surprised at Cyrus's presence at such a time, but he attributed it to the queen's desire to give the new ruler the benefit of her plans for the beautifying and improvement of the city. He knew full well that to the artistic queen was due the credit for the city's present beauty, rather than to her indolent and untalented husband. At length she seemed to have finished her communications with the conqueror, for he arose and made as if to depart, but noticing for the first time the presence of Sheshbazzar, he tiptoed around the couch and knelt beside the prince.

"The queen has been giving me a wonderful narrative, in which I am deeply interested. Tomorrow morning I confer with the leaders of the Jews. Be thou present also, as I shall have need of thee," he whispered.

The prince bowed slightly and a moment later Cyrus left the apartment. The dying queen now seemed to realize the presence of the young man, for she slowly and painfully turned

over to face him. Halista, noticing the anguish even this slight movement caused her mother, arose and assisted her. The hand which Sheshbazzar had taken when he first knelt at the bedside had been snatched away during one of the paroxysms. Now the queen returned it and the young man held it lovingly in his, his heart aching as he noticed how thin and white it was and how the blue veins stood up. She was evidently about to speak to him but she hesitated. Another terrible season of suffering came over her, which on departing left her still weaker. The sad watchers saw clearly that this intense suffering could not last much longer; that under the awful strain the weary heart would soon cease its struggle.

As soon as she could articulate, Nitocris murmured: "Send for Daniel."

Belibus arose, realizing himself to be the only one present who could leave at such a moment. Without the door he found a servant whom he dispatched for the Hebrew prophet. When he again knelt beside his loved one, whom the dying queen had bequeathed to him shortly before the entrance of Cyrus, the queen was speaking to Sheshbazzar.

"I had much to say to thee," she said, her voice so low the young man was obliged to lay his head beside hers in order to catch the words. "I feared I should be taken away before the messenger could bring thee so I told my story to King Cyrus. He heard me through and has promised to set right a terrible wrong, a wrong that at this moment weighs upon my soul, though I am not to blame for its existence. I only knew of it three days ago. With my dying breath I swear I knew nothing of the grievous error that has been made. Perhaps 'tis best this tale should be told thee by other lips than mine. While I cannot blame myself for the wrong that has been done I consider it my duty to set matters aright. When thou hearest the message I have left I beg thee blame me not. With my dying breath I pray this mistake may yet bring thee good."

Another battle with pain followed, a battle won by the

dying queen, but when it had passed she found her forces weakened and she realized how soon the superior foe would wear her out. She lay silent for some moments, making no effort either to speak or move. Halista arose and poured a few drops of wine down the parched throat. Again the queen rallied and as soon as her eyes opened she began to speak. She placed one hand within the prince's and with the other stroked his long black locks. Her gentle touch awoke his love and he realized what his life had been without a mother's touch to soothe and comfort. Instinctively he bent over and kissed the pale hand he held. A smile glorious in its sweetness sprang to the dying woman's face and she too realized what she had missed in being separated from this man who would have been to her so loving and dutiful a son.

"Is this the end?" murmured the queen. "Are our virtues unrewarded, our sins unpunished? Do the good and the bad, the just and the unjust go down to the same fate? Or is there some unseen world, a world beyond the tomb? The gods are cruel, not kind, if this is all the reward they give us. A few hours of pain and then a cold tomb. Is that the goal to look forward to throughout a life of virtue and battle with temptation? Are my victories over my body and over the world about me of no account? O God save me!"

As the queen pronounced her series of unanswerable questions her voice gradually arose until she ended in a scream that went straight to the hearts of her hearers. Another seizure followed and for a much longer period than before she wrestled with her pitiless foe. Before the pain passed away and the vigorous intellect of the queen returned to the subject which still puzzles mankind even after wonderful Divine revelations have been made, Daniel, the Hebrew prophet, entered the chamber.

Belibus as the least related person present felt it his duty to do whatever required anyone's absence from the bedside. Therefore upon the prophet's entrance he arose and procured a low stool which he placed for the prophet close beside the couch upon the side vacated by King Cyrus. The prince raised

his head and, noting the action of his friend, he motioned him to place the stool upon the side of the couch at which the others knelt. This was to save the queen the agony of again turning over. Daniel silently accepted the stool and sat waiting for the dying woman to rally. When the pain had finally subsided Halista again administered some wine and after a few moments Nitocris opened her eyes. She saw Daniel first and recognized him at once.

"I have sent for thee," she said, her voice so low as to be almost a whisper, "to give me comfort in my last moments. As the wisest man I know I wish thee to answer for me a question that troubles me. Tell me, good Daniel, what will become of me when the last breath leaves my body. Is the tomb the end or is there some wonderful spirit land beyond?"

"Queen Nitocris," answered the old man, leaning over toward her and speaking so as to be heard of all those about the bed, "the subject upon thy mind is one much thought on by learned men. As a Hebrew I believe in one God, Jehovah, who guides us through life and takes us to Himself after death.

"Of this hereafter, this future life; happiness for the righteous, everlasting misery for the wicked, I have the assurance. Did not God say unto Abraham 'Thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace'? Now Abraham came from Chaldea and was buried in Canaan. Hence this message cannot refer to the mere burial of the body, for Abraham was not buried with his fathers. Ah no, Queen Nitocris, God had a meaning in His words and as I interpret His meaning He promised our father Abraham a life beyond the tomb, and if Abraham why not thee and me?"

As he spoke these words the prophet leaned over yet farther and delivered his message in the tense manner of an enthusiast.

"Moses, the leader of my people, he who led them back from their long Egyptian bondage, when praying for his people's pardon said to the Lord, 'if thou forgive them not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.'* This, Queen, I take as an indication of future reward and future pun-

* Exodus 32:32.

ishment. Again, Saul the first king of Israel, sought an interview with a dead prophet and talked with his spirit.* Can we not consider this proof of our contention, else whence did Samuel's spirit come? Not from the tomb surely."

"Go on, go on," whispered the queen eagerly.

"I could continue, Queen, going through the Hebrew writings to prove my belief, but it is unnecessary. Every writer gives some hint of this future life. King David often alludes to it in his psalms and his son Solomon speaks of it in unmistakable terms. He even names it in these words, 'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.'** Here the wise king refers to the corruption of the body but the incorruptibility of the spirit."

"Wonderful, wonderful," murmured the pale lips.

A moment later a shade of disappointment came over her face.

"But that is for the Jews alone," she said.

"God is the father of all mankind, though to the Jews has he manifested himself the more clearly. I believe, Queen, such a life as thine has been cannot end in the tomb. There must be a hereafter for so noble a spirit as thine."

"Bend lower, Daniel," she whispered, "I have something to say to thee alone. The others will leave for a moment."

The three young people arose and withdrew to the farther side of the room. Halista turned to the prince and with tears in her voice as well as in her eyes, said: "Oh my brother, how can we let her go?"

"God knows best," he answered solemnly.

Shortly a motion from Daniel recalled them to the bedside. As Sheshbazzar approached the old prophet gazed upon him long and steadfastly.

"Can it be, can it be?" he murmured.

When they again knelt beside the couch the poor queen was struggling with her adversary. This attack was still longer than its predecessor. When it passed away she lay as

* 1 Samuel 28:15.

** Ecclesiastes 12:7.

one dead. Halista again administered the wine and again the strong stimulant brought the dying woman back to life.

"Tell me more, Daniel," were her first words.

The old man hesitated a moment. Then an expression of unearthly joy came into his face.

"I see! I see!" he cried. "The heavens are opened and I see the Holy One awaiting, his arms outstretched. Oh Lord, receive this soul."

There was a cry from the couch.

"Beautiful! Beautiful!"

There was a gurgle as of a person drowning and then all was still. The foremost woman of the world was dead.

With tears streaming from her eyes Halista arose. Advancing to the head of the couch, she bent over and kissed the high white forehead of her noble mother. Then she laid hold of the snowy coverlet and gently drew it up until all that remained of the mighty queen was hidden from view.

Daniel arose, his face radiant.

"Who can say this Jehovah of mine is for Jews alone?" he cried.

"I cannot," answered Sheshbazzar, "for I already believe Him to be my God as well as thine. Oh mighty Daniel, help me become His child."

"The Lord be praised," said Daniel, laying his hand affectionately upon the young man's shoulder.

"Ah, Prince," he added, "the Almighty has a work for thee to do."

CHAPTER XLVI

RHESA

The new day was breaking as Sheshbazzar left the palace and started for his home. His mood was a paradox; sorrow over the queen's death, joy over the new-found hope that filled his soul. The scene he had just witnessed was printed indelibly upon

his mind, never to be forgotten as long as he lived. From the depths of his soul he believed Nitocris to have passed from this world into a higher and better one. He could but feel that she was better off for the change. He considered her life of grief and sorrow and then thought of the beauty of life in a world where they were unknown. In thinking of her new life beyond, the keen edge of his grief was dulled. A smile came into his face as he thought of the queen in the new world and the desire of meeting her in the hereafter took possession of him.

He sought his couch to obtain a brief rest, leaving word with the servants to call him in time to be at the palace as King Cyrus had requested. Notwithstanding the orders he had given he was late when he appeared at the palace. He entered the library, which was still used as a reception room. A considerable company was grouped about the dais listening to the words King Cyrus was speaking. As the prince entered the room the conqueror was announcing the surrender of King Nabonidos at Borsippa, thus completing the subjugation of the empire. From this announcement he passed directly to the business for which he had called the meeting.

"Men of Judah," he began, "finding myself sole ruler of this land, it becomes my duty to undo such acts of my predecessors as were wrong or oppressive. In accordance with that duty and acting under Divine command one of my first acts shall be the restoration of the Jewish people to their own land. To this end I have called thee together to take counsel with thee, but before we proceed to make plans for the future I wish to ask: Is there living an hereditary prince, one who is by birth entitled to rule over thee?"

There was silence for some moments, the Jews looking at one another as if wondering whose place it was to speak. At length Nehum stepped forward as became his rank and age. Cyrus recognized the old man and called him by name. To his astonishment Nehum beheld Rastagus of the desert.

"I fear, King Cyrus," began the old man, "the noble line of King David is extinct."

Then briefly he sketched to the king all that was known of Shealtiel and the child born in Babylon's palace. In closing he mentioned the theory put forward by Orma. As he closed a groan went up from the Jewish leaders. During the old man's recital the attitude of King Cyrus was a peculiar one. He sat leaning forward, one elbow resting upon his knee and one foot tapping the stool impatiently. He seemingly was in haste for Nehum to finish. Hardly had the old man pronounced the last word when Cyrus arose and called loudly:

"Is the Prince Sheshbazzar present?" Then spying the young man standing modestly behind the company of Jews, he called: "Come hither Prince."

As the young man left his station in answer to the king's summons the latter stepped down from the platform and advanced to meet him. As they met King Cyrus placed a hand upon the young man's shoulder and called in a loud voice:

"Zerubbabel, Prince of Judah, I salute thee."

Then taking the thoroughly surprised prince by the arm he led him up the steps to the platform. Turning to the Jews he pointed to the young man and cried:

"Men of Judah, behold thy prince, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel!"

Simultaneously as from one throat arose the cry: Rhesa! Rhesa! (The Prince! The Prince!)

As the cry of the Jews died away King Cyrus raised his hand in token of a desire to be heard. There was instant silence. Before speaking he motioned the prince to be seated in one of the twin thrones.

"Men of Judah," he began, "I ask thee not to accept this young man as thy prince on my simple word alone. I propose to introduce a witness whose testimony will prove conclusively the birth and lineage of this noble young man, thy prince, who

will lead thee back to thine own land and direct the rebuilding of thy cities."

"Listen," he continued. "Last night there died in this palace a wonderful woman, Nitocris, Queen of Babylon. While she was yet in the possession of her faculties she sent for me and as I knelt beside her couch, she told me of this young man's birth and of his later life. Until within three days of her death she supposed him to be her own son, Prince Sheshbazzar. She told me where I could find the only witness who could prove her tale. This witness I have found and I now propose to introduce her to this company."

"Call the woman," he said to a soldier.

A moment later the man returned accompanied by Maraida, former concubine of Nabonidos. She mounted the platform modestly and standing by the side of King Cyrus she told her story in a half shy but at the same time wholly convincing manner.

"My name is Maraida and I am a daughter of Judah," she began. "Since my earliest recollection I have lived in the king's palace or in his villa. For three years I was servant to Queen Nitocris. I nursed her when the young prince was born and I cared for the child until his father's murder threw the palace into turmoil.

"Three weeks after the young prince was born a woman of my own race, an inmate of the palace, also gave birth to a son. She did not recover from her confinement but remained a bed-ridden helpless sufferer from that day. Her babe was also given into my keeping and for convenience's sake and with the queen's consent the little Jewish babe became an inmate of the royal nursery. Never were two children more alike. In size and form and feature they so nearly resembled each other as to be taken for twins. I could hardly tell them apart myself. Only upon the right hip of the Jewish child was a blood-red birthmark in the form of a human hand. Often when they were both undressed I looked for the birthmark before I could tell upon which child to put the fine clothes

and upon which the poor ones. For nearly two years I cared for my charges and I learned to love them as though they were my own. Particularly did I become attached to the son of my race and gradually I came to regard him as my own. His mother I saw but seldom and even when I saw her she asked not after the child. Her illness seemed to have affected her mind and I sometimes thought she had forgotten his existence.

"I will pass on to the momentous night that affects my present subject, the night of the king's murder. Upon that eventful evening I was sitting in the nursery which opened out of the queen's apartment. I heard voices without and entered the queen's chamber. An old priest was there. I heard him say, 'they are murdering the king.' A moment later the king came running, followed closely by the assassins. In they came, bent on their murderous errand. The queen stood as a statue, her infant son pressed to her bosom. Quick as a flash a thought came to me and I acted upon it instantly without stopping to question its wisdom. I ran into the nursery, picked up the Jewish babe and returned to the queen's chamber. At the moment I entered the king fell pierced by a dozen swords. I ran up to the old priest who stood beside the queen.

"'Here father, quick,' I cried, 'change the infants.'

"He caught the idea at once and on the instant the babes were changed. I hurried away and the old man followed me, bearing the rescued prince in his arms. In the excitement we escaped unnoticed. Hardly had I left the room when the murderers tore the babe from the queen's breast and ended its tiny life.

"After all was quiet again I reentered the queen's chamber. I was sad. I realized that to save the prince of my people's enemies I had sacrificed one of my own race. The realization appalled me. I hoped to see the babe again but he had already been taken away and until within a few days I have never seen him. The murdered child lay upon its father's body, their blood mingled in a ghastly pool. I picked it up tenderly, horrible object though it was and hastened to leave the room. I procured a dish of water and laying out a set of the prince's

finest clothes, made ready to prepare the dead child for burial. I carefully removed its blood stained clothing and turned him over upon my lap to wash him. As I did so I met with a surprise that nearly made me drop him. His right hip was fair and white with never a mark nor blemish! The prince had been murdered and the Jewish child lived! I suddenly realized that one of my own race would grow up to be king of Babylon. The thought gave me momentary joy but my joy was speedily turned to sorrow as I remembered he would also grow up an idolater.

“How I came to make such a mistake I know not but that day when I dressed them I put the fine linen and lace upon the Jew and the coarse garments upon the Babylonian. Oh my brethren, the hand of God guided me that morning. He caused me to make the mistake that the Prince of Judah, like Moses in Egypt, might grow up among the rich and noble, might learn their ways of living, their methods of warfare and be thereby the better fitted to lead his people.

“The woman from whom I received the new-born babe was the wife of Shealtiel but not until last week did I know the babe was the Prince of Judah.”

She finished and turned to depart but Cyrus called upon her to remain.

During her recital the subject of it sat as a man in a dream. As she slowly unfolded her tale he gradually realized who he was and what a work was his to do. So the queen he had learned to love was not his mother. The thought was a bitter one. Was there another woman to come and embrace him and call him son? Throughout Maraida's narration these thoughts had been uppermost in his mind. The full significance of his new name and lineage did not impress him at the moment, so sudden had it all been. Be not ashamed of thy change, Prince Sheshbazzar. As prince of Babylon thy name would be unknown to history but as prince of Judah it shall be honored through ages to come.

"Has anyone a question to ask of our witness?" asked King Cyrus.

Nehum during this recital stood in the front rank of his brethren close to the platform. He had listened attentively to every word. His heart leaped as he realized what this discovery meant to his own household. Now at the king's invitation he had a question to ask of Maraida.

"To how many persons has this secret been known?" he asked.

"I dared not tell the queen of my error," she answered, "and so for many years the secret was my own. A year ago I revealed it unto Neboakhu the chief priest and a few days since I told it unto thy daughter, but forbade her repeating it. When from her I learned the babe was the only heir of King David I sought out Queen Nitocris and told her all."

"Had the queen never suspected it?"

"She had not. From the night of her husband's murder until the child had grown to manhood she saw him little. Even if the children had not so closely resembled each other she could not have discovered my mistake, for after the murder the child was taken away from her."

Cyrus waited a moment for other questions, but no more were put to her.

"Come Prince, we must borrow thy hip," he said.

The young man arose to exhibit the proof of his birth. Maraida turned to go but again Cyrus restrained her.

"We must have thee here to identify the mark," he said.

Zerubbabel opened his gown and pushed back his inner garment sufficient to show his hip. There, glowing upon it, was the mark of his birth, a blood-red human hand.

Maraida bowed to show her identification and instantly left the room.

Joshua, the young high priest, now sought attention and told them of his interview with the wife of Shealtiel. She, he said,

had dwelt emphatically upon the birthmark and had told him of the pre-natal influence which caused it.

"We are satisfied," called several of the Jews as their high priest finished speaking.

Zerubbabel resumed his seat and Cyrus took his place beside him upon the throne formerly occupied by Nabonidos. For upwards of two hours longer the conference lasted. They discussed the return of the Jews in a general way. All present realized the impossibility of making any definite plans thus early. There were important matters before them demanding months for settlement. The task of enrolling the scattered remnants of King David's once proud nation alone was one requiring much time and labor. Shortly before noon the meeting was declared over.

As Zerubbabel stepped down from the platform the first to greet him was Nehum. After embracing him the old man said:

"My Prince, joyful as I am to find in thy person the son of David, the tidings Daniel gave me this morning cause me greater joy."

The prince smiled but made no reply.

"Present me, good Nehum," said a voice near at hand.

A moment later Zerubbabel, the prince, and Joshua, the high priest of the Restoration, stood with clasped hands. The greetings of the noble young priest were none the less cordial because the man before him was the accepted lover of the woman he himself had hoped to win.

"Thou wilt dine with me today?" said Nehum, after the Jews had one by one greeted their prince.

"I shall be glad to accept thy invitation," was the reply.

"We seek thy company to grace our table," said King Cyrus, coming up at this moment.

"I thank thee King, but I have already promised to accompany worthy Nehum to his home," replied the prince.

"Ah," said the conqueror smiling, "I would I had a black-

eyed daughter. Then perhaps mine invitation would be accepted."

The prince smiled as he turned away from the monarch to follow the aged Jew.

Upon their arrival at Nehum's residence the old man showed his guest into the reception room bidding him there await the call to dinner. Some moments after his host left him Zerubabel heard a light footstep and turned toward the door as Orma came through it. He opened his arms. Another moment and the woman of his heart was clasped tightly to his breast.

"Orma, my love," he whispered, "hast thou any more objections?"

"Nay, my Prince, I am thine," she said, looking up sweetly into his face.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE CAMP AT CARCHEMISH

Carchemish, that name so familiar in the history of the East, commanding as it did the main thoroughfare from the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris through Syria and Palestine to Egypt, was at all times a bone of contention for the various conquerors who at one time or another held sway over the wonderful Mesopotamian plain. It was presumably added to the domain of Egypt by Pharaoh Necho soon after the battle of Megiddo (B. C. 608) and reconquered by Nebuchadnezzar three years later. From that time until Babylon fell it probably remained true in its allegiance.

So often the scene of military camps and headquarters, it was now (early in the year B. C. 536) the temporary camping place of a vastly different expedition. The great plain without the city was covered with tents and pavilions, while thousands of horses, mules, camels and asses were tethered upon the outskirts of the camp.

In the center of the encampment a group of tents surrounding on three sides a large central pavilion gave evidence that here lodged the leader of the expedition. Before the large pavilion a young man paced up and down in an agitated manner. He was clad simply in flowing robes, while a silken hood was thrown loosely over his head. Upon his feet he wore plain leather sandals fastened over his instep with broad bands of embroidered leather. The leader of the expedition was none other than he whose fortunes we have been following under his various names but now known by his true one, Zerubbabel.

As he paced thus before his lodging place his mind dwelt upon the scenes of his life that led up to his present position. He lived through those scenes again. He saw himself again upon the desert; he heard again the faint cry for help; he saw Orma lying helpless upon the sand. He lived again those awful moments in the drowning chamber; he saw himself hurrying through the Hanging Gardens bearing his loved one in his arms and he saw, with a shudder, himself plunge a knife into the back of a fellow man. He lived again those eventful days preceding and including the fall of Babylon. But more particularly his mind dwelt upon the last day, the day of their start.

He saw the long cavalcade as it passed slowly out through the Sippara gate. He saw himself as he stopped at the gate to say farewell to those friends who were not to accompany him. There was Daniel who was to remain and live through wonderful experiences. There were Belibus and Halista, man and wife, the gallant soldier a high officer under Cyrus. As he thought of this wonderful pair he became sad that both still worshiped Bel. He saw the aged banker, Egibi, as he bade the prince farewell. Thoughts of the banker suggested the fortune of Neboakhu, which at this moment was stored in the camp destined to play an important part in the reestablishment of the Jewish people. He thought of Heber and his wife Tirmar, both left behind to remain in the service of Cyrus. He thought of the ugly little dwarf, Ulbar, who

had saved his life, and he thought of the indolent monarch whom he had considered his enemy but who through all had been his friend. He remembered the poor lunatic he had seen led from Belshazzar's banquet hall. Thought of the father brought the son to mind and he sighed as he remembered Iddin's sacrifice. Last of all he thought of the noble conqueror who had been so kind and generous. Cyrus had been present at the gate to bid them Godspeed.

His reverie was interrupted by a woman coming out of the pavilion. He turned quickly to greet her. It was Maraida. She approached the prince and with a profound bow said: "It is over, sir. Thou hast a son. Now thou mayest enter."

A look of mingled joy and relief came into his face as he turned to follow her. He passed quickly into the tent and knelt before a simple couch in the farther corner.

Orma lay back upon her pillow weak and faint from her hour of trial, but upon her face was the radiant smile of motherhood, reflected from a heart overflowing with maternal love. Beside her, closely nestled against her breast was the tiny being just born into the world.

Zerubbabel leaned over tenderly and imprinted a kiss upon the fair white forehead of his wife and another upon the tiny pink cheek of his first-born.

"I thank thee, O my love, for my son," he whispered.

A loving smile was the only answer he received from Orma's pale lips. Then, as he still knelt, from a heart overflowing with gratitude, he poured forth a prayer of thanks to his God who had brought his loved one through her trial in safety and given him a son.

The child thus born while the Jews were journeying to their own land was named Hananiah (whom Jehovah has graciously given). Seventeen generations later a descendant of this babe, named Mary, gave birth to a son, who was called Jesus. He it is who is the Savior of the World.

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