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Transcriber's Notes:

Older spellings have been retained. Variations in the spelling of a few personal and place names, listed at the end of the text have also been retained.

Some minor printer's errors have been corrected. They are listed at the end of the text.

Istar of Babylon

A Phantasy

BY

MARGARET HORTON POTTER

AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE OF DE MAILLY"

HARPER & BROTHERS

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TO
MY HUSBAND AND DEAR COMRADE
JOHN DONALD BLACK

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PREFACE

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"The higher ideas, my dear friend, can hardly be set forth except through the medium of examples; every man seems to know all things in a kind of dream, and then again to know nothing when he wakes.... But people seem to forget that some things have sensible images, which may be easily shown when any one desires to exhibit any of them or explain them to an inquirer, without any trouble or argument; while the greatest and noblest truths have no outward image of themselves visible to man which he who wishes to satisfy the longing soul of the inquirer can adapt to the eye of sense, and therefore we ought to practise ourselves in the idea of them; for immaterial things, which are the highest and greatest, are shown only in thought and idea, and in no other way, *and all that we are saying is said for the sake of them.*"^[1]

"Then reflect ... that the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal and intelligible and uniform and unchangeable; and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal and unintelligible and multiform and dissoluble and changeable.

"And were we not saying long ago that the soul, when using the body as an instrument of perception, ... is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard when under their influence.

"But when, returning unto herself, she reflects, then she passes into the realm of purity and eternity and immortality and unchangeableness, which are her kindred; ... then she ceases from erring ways, and, being in communion with the unchanging, is unchanging."^[2]

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LIBRI PERSONÆ

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Book I

Theron: *A citizen of the Doric town of Selinous in Sicily. The father of Charmides.*

Heraia: *The wife of Theron, and mother of Charmides.*

Phalaris: *An athlete; the elder brother of Charmides.*

CHARMIDES: *A young Greek rhapsode, who, hearing a story of the living goddess, Istar of Babylon, becomes inspired with the desire to see and worship her, and sets out from Selinous to journey to Babylon.*

KABIR: *A Phœnician trader, shipwrecked off the harbor of Selinous, with whom Charmides travels as far as Tyre.*

ABDOSIR: *The brother of Kabir, a citizen of Tyre.*

HODO: *A Babylonian trader, head of a caravan travelling between Babylon and Tyre, with whom Charmides goes from Tyre to the Great City.*

ALLARAINÉ: *The archetype of song; once a companion spirit of Istar of Babylon.*

Book II

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ISTAR: *The archetype of womanhood, made mortal as a punishment for having doubted the mercy of God. She became incarnate in Babylon, and was worshipped there as the famous Babylonian goddess "Istar," though her archetypal name was "Narahmouna."*

NABONIDUS: *Or "Nabu-Nahîd," last native king of Babylon, through his mother a grandson of Nebuchadrezzar. He reigned from B.C. 555-538, when Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great.*

BELSHAZZAR: *Or Belti-shar-uzzur, son of Nabonidus, and governor of Babylon. He was never proclaimed king of Babylon.*

BELITSUM: *The second queen of Nabonidus; a woman of plebeian origin.*

CYRUS: *The Great, conqueror of Media, Persia, and Elam, to whom Babylon fell by treachery.*

CAMBYSES: *The elder son of Cyrus, who, after him, became king of Babylon. He afterwards committed suicide in Egypt, on being accused of the murder of his brother.*

BARDIYA: *The younger son of Cyrus, afterwards murdered by his brother, Cambyses.*

GOBRYAS: *Cyrus' general: the conqueror of Sippar; once governor of Gutium under the king of Babylon.*

LORD RIBĀTA BIT-SHUMUKIN: *A royal councillor of Nabonidus, a member of the prince's suite, and the intimate companion of Belshazzar: also landlord of the tenement of Ut.*

DANIEL: *The Hebrew prophet, also called Beltishazzar, who, after the death of Nebuchadrezzar, lost his position at court, and at the time of the fall of Babylon was living in a small house in the Jewish quarter.*

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AMRAPHEL: *The high-priest of Babylon, and priest of Bel; a traitor to the crown.*

VUL-RAMĀN OF BIT-YAKIN: *Priest of Nebo and Nergal, and second in power to Amraphel.*

LUDAR: *President of the college of priests at Sippar, and high-priest of the temple of Shamash. A traitor to the crown.*

NĀNĀ-BABILŪ: *Governor of Sippar. Loyal to Nabonidus.*

BUNANITŪ: *A Jewess, the head of the historic banking-firm of "Ēgibi."*

KALNEA: *A Jew, the son of BunanitŪ.*

KABTIYA: *The son of Kalnea, a Jewish boy.*

BELTANI: *A Babylonish widow of the lower class, living in the tenement of Ut. The mother of Ramûa and Baba.*

RAMŪA: *A flower-girl, the daughter of Beltani, afterwards married to Charmides.*

BABA: *Younger daughter of Beltani, afterwards the slave of Lord Ribâta.*

BAZUZU: *Beltani's negro slave.*

ZOR: *Baba's pet goat.*

HODO: *The Babylonish trader.*

CHARMIDES: *The Greek rhapsode.*

ALLARAINÉ: *The archetype of song.*

PROLOGUE THE INCARNATION

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Thronged in Uranian mists, all the archtype spirits of heaven,

Gathered in slow-firing wrath against one of their natural number,
 Watched her who, first of them all since Jehovah created their order,
 Daring the Almighty ire, did forget her transcendence for man.
 Wonder divine o'er the sorrow and sin of the earth-condemned races
 Dwelt in the heart of the moon-daughter, now beyond ken of her kindred.
 They who, betwixt the one Godhead, His logos, creation, and man,
 Infinite, soulless, essential, divine, were highest ideas,
 Perfect observance forever had kept of their order, till now,
 Seemingly fearless in great disobedience, Istar, the moon-child,
 Caught and had struck to her heart a great earth-flown vibration: so learned
 All that her high-worshipped fellows knew not of mankind and of woe.
 Fleeing the loud-rolling world with her new apperception, she sped
 Far to the heart of the moon, where her father, the moon-god, received her.
 Then, on her silence of wisdom and grief, rose a fast-winging plaint
 Carried across vasty deeps by the loud-surgng breath of the wind.
 Host upon host, then, the infinite tide, the reflectors of being
 Swept towards the refuge of Istar. Their voices, in anger uplifted,
 Crashed in a thunderous whirlwind through space; and their far-flowing light
 Gleaming and streaming in chaos of bright iridescence, in flames
 Violet, yellow and green, silver, crimson, and shimmering gold,
 Glorified space and struck down the world-dwellers to terrified prayer.
 Sin, the great moon-god, the father of her who sought refuge alone,
 Mourned in his mystical home; cried aloud through the uprising clamor,
 Asking indulgence for Istar the woman. Him answered but one:
 Allaraine, son of the stars, the bard of Æolian songs,
 Lord of white clouds, who, begot of a sunset, went winging his way
 Far through the star-vault at midnight, full-sprung, with his heavenly path
 Marked by mellifluous song—'twas he who to Sin made reply.
 He, who alone, from the earth's evening glow had beheld earthly passion,
 Tranced by the high, fearless wrong of incarnate humanity's power,
 Fearlessly now, before all the tumultuous host, voiced his pity.
 Vain were his words, though they fell into space like the pearls of the sea,
 Melting round God's very throne, with melodious ecstasy fraught.
 Silent the archtypes heard, and in silence of trembling delight
 Istar, the lover of souls, concealed in the moon's dim retreat,
 Heard him. And silent the earth-world revolved and Time's pulses were
 stilled.

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Finally, out of the deep, where space is not and time cannot be,
 God, the Almighty Jehovah, made answer to Allaraine's plea:
 "Istar, who knowledge of incarnate souls was forbidden to hold,
 Thou, who unknowing, daredst pity men's sorrows and sins manifold.
 Go to the earth-world as one among men, and there shalt thou behold
 Life, and its correlate, Death. Sentient there thou shalt live, but shalt be
 Heaven-born still, and thus worshipped on earth, though thou mayst not be
 free
 Till, 'neath the sorrows of flesh, *thou shalt find man's relation to me.*"

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Out of the mists of the moon floated Istar the daughter of Sin.
 Out of the mists and the fog came she forth, and Æolian choirs,
 Winds of the evening, sang low of her going. Upborne by her tresses
 Floating above and about her, she sank; and the dawn was not yet.
 Istar, the daughter of Sin, in her vestment of tissue of silver,
 Under which glowed the deep purple proclaiming her godhead, and there,
 Full on her breast, the bright flush of the crimson that told of her passion,
 Laughed to herself and the winds, as she came forth from out of her refuge.
 Down, far adown the dark, mystical depths of the chasm of chaos
 Floated the mystical maiden; a voice like a clarion echo
 Calling from out of the mist she had left: "O Istar, beloved,
 Hear and return unto me, father, archetype, soul of the sphere!"
 Istar, the daughter of Sin, obeying the word of the Lord,
 Heard but not heeded the voice. Only pausing a thought in her course,
 Flinging her head to the stars, laughed aloud with her lips that were scarlet.
 Then, with a shake and a shrug of her bare, cloud-born shoulders, she sent
 Clashing and ringing below into space a bright silvery shower
 Flashing and pringing with light; which earth-men called shower of stars.
 Istar continued her flight and went swaying her tortuous way
 Down and adown past all planets and suns in their horror of heat,
 Till, in the end, the great fall was accomplished, and Istar was born,
 Soulless and pure in the city called "Gateway of God."

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Book I

THE JOURNEY

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I

THE SEA

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A hot April sun shone full over the waters to the pencilled line of the southern horizon, where a long circle divided the misty, shimmering dove-color of the Mediterranean from the richer blue of the swelling sky. A path of sun-strewn ripples, broadening as the afternoon advanced, ended at that distant line, and found its starting-point at the rocky base of the Selinuntian acropolis, on the southwestern coast of Sicily. The day was warm, and the air rich with the perfume of sweet alyssum, beneath which delicate flowers the whole island lay buried. A light breeze feathered the sea, occasionally sweeping away enough powdered sunshine to disclose the rich sapphire depths of the under-waters. Nevertheless more perfect skies had been, and generally were, at this season of the year; for to-day half the west was hidden by a curtain of short, thick clouds that threatened to hide the usual evening glory of wine-tinted waters and crimson-flooded skies.

Upon the height of the cliff that terminates the broad Selinuntian plain, Selinous, white, Doric city, with her groups of many-columned temples and her well-built walls, sent forth the usual droning murmur of life. White-robed men and women were wont to move in unhurried dignity in their citadels in those days when Æneas was not yet a myth, before Syracuse knew Gelon, when the first Aahmes ruled in Egypt, when Cræsus of Lydia and Astyages of Media were paying bitter tribute to the great Elamite just retired from Babylonian plains to his far Rhagæ in the Eastern hills; and here, on the Sicilian coast, the Greek city lay in placid beauty upon her two hills, divided by the philosophically drained valley, bounded upon the right hand by her shining river, while far to the left, in the direction of Acragas, a line of rugged hills rose into the blue. The four bright temples of the acropolis were mirrored in the sea below. On the east hill, at some distance from where the gigantic new sanctuary to Apollo was building, and directly in front of the old temple of Hera, on the very edge of the cliff, drowsing in the sunlight, lay Charmides, a shepherd, surrounded by his flock.

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The life of a shepherd in the flood-time of a Sicilian spring was not an arduous one. If it had been, Theron's son would not, in all probability, have followed that calling through the few years that he was required to spend at ordinary labor. For, as his family realized and his appearance too markedly proclaimed, this child of the Spartans did not partake of the spirit of his race. Rarely, singularly beautiful he was, and fair as an Athenian. Apollo himself might have turned envious at sight of this disciple of his as he slept on a drift of wild daisies, his short, white tunic stained with green, the thong that served him for a girdle loosely tied, much-worn sandals bound upon his feet, and a wreath of gray olive-leaves woven into the rumpled hair that fell upon his neck in rings of living gold. Charmides' eyes had the color of the sea. His brows were fine and straight; his mouth not altogether lacking in strength, yet perfect as a woman's. As he slept, one of the youth's sunburned hands grasped a tuft of herbs that grew upon the edge of the slope, while the other, even in his unconsciousness, drew a fleeting harmony from the lyre that lay beside him.

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This dalliance with the honored instrument, taken with his unathletic physique, was evidence enough of the chosen profession of the temporary shepherd. Four years ago, at the age of eighteen, Charmides had elected to enter the ranks of that band of rhapsodists known to us now only as the predecessors of fire-winged Pindar and his glorious brethren. Never was the shepherd seen following his flock over the fields without lyre or flute in his hands; and no holiday or festival was quite complete without some lyric chanted in his clear tenor to the accompaniment of those sweet, primitive chords that so fittingly clothed the syllables of the most melodious of all tongues. Charmides' poems, however, were always of one type. Natural beauty, the evening wind, the perfume of a flower, the red of dawn, the silver of moonlight, he would reproduce so perfectly in words that he was left unrivalled in his peculiar field. But greater themes, battle-hymns of Mars and Nike, or idyls of Cythera and the dove-drawn chariot, had not apparently occurred to him as desirable subjects for his art. Either Charmides was what his athlete brother declared him—a woman dressed in too short a tunic—or his true nature was sleeping far beyond its natural period.

The sun hung just above the clouds as the youth sat up and looked about him. His flock, a drove of white, long-haired sheep, whose wool was woven into many a tunic of their herdsman, had wandered out of sight behind the temple of Hera. Charmides unbound his flageolet from the side of his left leg, and, without stirring from his place, lifted the instrument to his lips, playing upon it a quaint, primitive strain full of minor cadences, mournful, but peculiarly pleasing. For two or three minutes this tune was the only sound to be heard. Then, of a sudden, came a distant "Ba-a!" from the direction of the temple, and round its eastern columns appeared a white head, another, and another, till the whole flock was visible. For a moment or two they halted, regarding their keeper with silly, affectionate eyes. Charmides smiled as he watched them, and presently gave a little nod. At sight of it the leader of the company started forward again, and the entire number followed, at a gentle trot. When he was entirely surrounded by his animals, Charmides put his pipe back in its place, caressed with rough tenderness the nearest lamb, and finally, having had

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enough of afternoon with the sea, sprang to his feet thinking to proceed farther afield. As his eyes met the western horizon, from which his face had for the last few moments been turned, he broke his yawn short off in the middle, and his intent was forgotten. The cloud, which now covered the sun, was no longer gray, but a deep purple, palpitating with inward fire; while far to the west a galley, a little, black patch upon the waters, rose upon the horizon, coming from Mazzara. Charmides saw possibilities of hexameters in the race, and, though its outcome did not affect him in the least, he had a desire to know whether he must have Zeus with his bolts bring vengeance on some disobedient mortal, or whether Father Neptune and his dolphins were to lead the men of the galley safely into the little Selinuntian harbor.

It was not many minutes before the little vessel had become a Phœnician bireme with a huge, brown mainsail hanging loosely on the mast, and barely visible oars churning the water on each side with hasty vigor. By this time the last radiance had been swept from the sky. The distant waters darkened, and their restless, uneasy masses began to show flecks of foam. Presently, for a bare second, through a single rift in the cloud, a thin gleam of sunlight shot out and down to the misty sea, lighting the dark surface to opalescent brightness, and then disappearing in a single breath. As the sky darkened again the air grew cold. Three or four petrels, birds of the storm, rising from the distant sands, veered joyously out over the flattening waters. A faint murmur of angry winds came from the west, and with its first sound Charmides was recalled from the scene in which he was blithely living to his flock, who were upon the verge of a stampede. They had ceased to eat and were standing quiveringly still, heads up, nostrils distended, fore-legs stiffening for the leap and race which would follow the first thunder-clap. Their shepherd was just in time. Putting all thought of the storm behind him, he lifted his lyre and started forward, singing as he went. The sheep followed him, with implicit faith, across the broad pasture and down the long, gentle slope in the direction of their fold and his father's house, till the sea and the galley and the storm were left to the petrels and those on the acropolis to watch.

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There, indeed, in front of the basilica, quite a band of citizens had assembled, watching with interest and anxiety the progress of the storm-beset vessel. The little ship had apparently a daring captain. No precautions whatever had been made for the first gust of wind; neither did the ship's course suggest that there would be an effort to gain the inner harbor of the city as speedily as possible. Instead, those that watched realized that she would be a hundred feet off the base of the acropolis cliff when the storm broke. At present the wind had so nearly died away that the main-sail flapped at the mast. The double banks of oars were working rapidly and unevenly, and the main deck of the vessel was, to all appearances, entirely deserted. Evidently an unusual state of affairs prevailed on board of the Phœnician galley.

The pause that preceded the breaking of the storm was unnaturally long. Save for the gleam of an occasional, faintly hissing wave-crest, the waters had grown black. The heart of the storm-cloud seethed in purple, while all the rest of the sky was hung with gray. There came one long moment when the atmosphere sank under a weight of sudden heat. Then the far-distant murmur, which till now had been scarcely audible, rushed upon the silence in a mighty roar, as, up from the south, driven before the gale, came a long line of white waves that rose as they advanced till the very Tritons bent their heads and the nymphs scurried down to greener depths. Now a sudden, zigzag streak of fire shot through the cloud, followed by a crash as of all the bolts of Zeus let off at once. The galley seemed to be scarcely moving. Her sail hung loose upon its mast. Not a soul was to be seen upon the upper deck. Only the oars still creaked in their holes, and the water churned unevenly along the vessel's sides. The wind was nearly upon her. There was a second glare of lightning, a second crash more fearful than the first; and then it was as if the fragile craft, seized by some cyclopean hand, had been lifted entirely from the water to be plunged downward again into the midst of chaos.

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The number of spectators of this unusual scene had by this time been greatly augmented. Upon the acropolis, at the point where the street of Victory came to an end upon the edge of the precipitous cliff, stood a crowd of men and women, to whom others were continually coming from the shelter of their houses. Presently Charmides, together with his brother, Phalaris, both breathless from their run across the valley of the Hypsas, arrived on the cliff. The galley was now struggling in the centre of the storm, writhing and shuddering over the waves directly in front of the acropolis. As the only possible salvation, her bow had been pointed directly to the south into the wind, a move which made it necessary for the rowers, backing water with all their strength, to keep her from driving backward upon the great rock, fragments of which were strewn far out through the water from the base of the cliff behind. Through the incessant lightning flashes the violent and uneven use of the oars was clearly visible, and, after watching them in silence for a few moments, Phalaris shook his head.

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"The rowers will not endure long under such labor. The boat must be driven ashore."

"As yet they have lost no distance, though."

And this, indeed, was true. Full fifty yards now lay between the first rock and the stern of the galley. It seemed, too, as if the storm had lulled a little. Charmides shouted the idea into his brother's ear, but Phalaris again shook his head, and both looked once more to the vessel, just in time to see her struck by a fresh gust of wind that tore the overstrained sail into ribbons and shreds. At the same instant the oars ceased their work. The boat spun completely round, twice, like a wheel, and a second later was driven, by one great wave, straight towards the huge rocks off the cliff.

"Apollo! What has happened to the rowers?" cried one of the elders.

"And where is the captain of this vessel? Is he a madman?"

"In three minutes more she will be a wreck. Come, Charmides!" shouted Phalaris, starting over the cliff.

Together the brothers climbed down the precipitous descent to the narrow strip of sand at its base. Here was a scene of no little activity. The Theronides found themselves last of a company of their friends to arrive at this point of vantage, where not a few had been standing for half an hour. Several older men were also grouped along the beach, anxiously watching the drama which threatened to terminate in a tragedy. At the moment when the brothers reached the lower shore, the galley, lifted high upon the wave, hung for a second on its summit, and then, as it broke, spun down and forward with sickening speed straight upon two horn-shaped rocks, between which she was presently wedged fast and firmly, twenty yards from shore. [Pg 10]

A little cry broke from Charmides' lips. With the next flash he beheld the galley heeled far upon her right side, oars shattered, sides still uncrushed, while on her prow there stood at last a black swarm of men.

By this time a dozen of the young Greeks, stripped of their wet tunics, were making their way out into the breakers, intent upon saving the wrecked sailors from being dashed upon the rocks as they escaped from their ship. Charmides hastily followed the example of his fellows and ran into the chilly water after Phalaris, who stood in, shoulder-deep, fifty feet from the ship. It was nearly impossible to keep a footing there. Breaker after breaker dashed over their heads, and Phalaris, expert swimmer as he was, found himself unable to stand upright, and frequently struggled to his feet choking for breath, with sea-water in his eyes, ears, and nose. Charmides fared worse still. Overbalanced by the second wave that struck him, he was whirled round and round in it, and finally washed up on shore, half drowned. After a moment or two of gasping and reeling, he returned pluckily into the water, this time finding shelter beside a rock which he could also grasp. Phalaris managed to reach his side and share his protection, and there the two of them stood, waiting.

A period of delay and general commotion on the deck of the galley ensued. Three men in the centre of the company of sailors were engaged in some altercation, in which all the rest seemed far more interested than in making an escape from the vessel, which, apparently, was in no immediate danger of breaking up. Presently, however, to Phalaris' immense relief, for the useless battling with breakers was becoming too much, alike for his strength and for his patience, one of the men from the galley was seen to throw a rope over the vessel's side, make it fast upon the bulwark, and begin to lower himself, hand over hand, down to the water. At the rope's end he stopped, hung there for a moment, waiting for a wave to go by, and then slipped lightly in. Like all Phœnicians he was a good swimmer. Phalaris knew, from the manner in which he threw himself forward, that there was little danger of his not reaching the shore. Yet when, presently, a wave dashed violently over him, Charmides gave a little cry at seeing the man hurled helplessly forward, and then roll over and over in the grasp of the sea. Phalaris shouted above the clamor of winds and waters: [Pg 11]

"Watch, Charmides, to seize him!"

As the writhing body swirled towards them, both Greeks, leaning forward, caught and held it fast. The man was not drowned nor even unconscious. Accustomed to living more or less in the sea, he had swallowed but little water, and, being set upright again, with his feet touching bottom, he stood still for a moment, said something in Phœnician to his rescuers, and proceeded towards the shore, where most of the young men, less patient and less expert than Theron's sons, now stood.

Phalaris and Charmides, however, perceiving that they were likely to be of real use where they were, held their position; and, exhilarated by the excitement and pleasure of the first rescue, they caught and assisted, one by one, nearly the whole crew of the galley. Phalaris, indeed, was amazed at the way in which his brother bore himself. The rhapsode worked as vigorously as the athlete, showed no fear at the onslaught of the waves, and was almost as successful as the other at catching and holding the distressed swimmers as they came by. At length there remained upon the galley only the three men that had first been engaged in the discussion. Of these, two presently disappeared from sight in the hold of the ship, leaving one alone by the bulwark. As this person, the length of whose tunic showed him to be no common sailor, finally climbed over the ship's side and began to lower himself leisurely to the water, Phalaris turned to look upon his brother. Charmides' form was dimly outlined in the gathering darkness, and his features were indistinguishable. A lightning flash, however, presently revealed the face, pale and drawn with exhaustion. Phalaris perceived it sympathetically. [Pg 12]

"For this one man we will wait. Then, if there are not to be two drowned Greeks, we must make our way ashore," he said, hoarsely, and Charmides nodded assent.

The last man, for all his easy bearing, proved to be a far less expert swimmer than his predecessors. He had not accomplished more than a single, uncertain stroke when a wave caught him, rolled over his head, and buried him completely from the straining vision of his would-be rescuer. He was under water for what seemed to Charmides an eternity; and when, finally, by the light of a flash of lightning, the body was seen to reappear from the foam of a broken wave, it tossed there, lifeless, making no effort at resistance. Charmides rushed through the water to the drowning man's side, and, before reaching him, found himself out of his depth. As he sent a despairing shout to Phalaris, the supposed unconscious one addressed him, shouting above the

surrounding roar, in Phœnician:

"Save yourself, youth! I shall float—" The sentence was interrupted by a rush of water, which threw Charmides forward, and once more buried the light, limp body of this unusual person.

Acting upon the excellent advice of the floater, the Greek made his difficult way to the shore, arriving on the beach at the same time with Phalaris, and a moment later than the stranger, who had been washed up unhurt and apparently not much disturbed by his contest with the waves.

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The two brothers, reaching dry land again, found but few of their friends left on the sand. As the wet and half-drowned sailors arrived, one by one, on the shore, they had been approached by the native Greeks, and, the relations between Carthage and Selinous being as yet of the most amicable nature, hospitably taken up to the city, where warmth, food, and rest were to be had. Among the group of three or four that remained when the last Phœnician was washed up by the waves, was one who hastened to Charmides, as he stood dizzily on the sand looking back into the sea that was in such a furious commotion.

"Charmides, you have been foolhardy enough. Such work is well for Phalaris, perhaps, but—"

"Father, it seems to me that for many months Charmides has been deceiving us. By nature he is an excellent athlete—better than I."

Charmides shook his head and replied, faintly: "Let us go home. There is no more to do."

"But there remain still two men on the galley."

"For them," put in the stranger, speaking in awkward Greek, "you need not fear. They are still below with the slaves, but they will easily reach the shore, if, indeed, they wish to do so. I think they will rather remain where they are to-night."

"The galley does not appear to be breaking up."

"No. Her bottom did not strike. She is only wedged fast between two rocks."

In the little pause which followed, Theron peered through the darkness in an attempt to distinguish the features of the stranger. Night had closed in, however, in intense blackness, and before Charmides had time to put in a second, shivering appeal, his father said:

"Come then, my sons, we will start homeward. Your mother must be waiting our return. And you, O stranger, if you will accept of shelter and food at our hands, such as we have, in the name of Apollo, are yours."

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The man from the galley accepted, without hesitation, the proffered hospitality. Then Theron bade good-night to those with whom he had been talking, and the stranger followed in the footsteps of the young men, who were hastening along the sand that skirted the cliff and thence ran into a wider beach that terminated the valley between the two hills.

It was twenty minutes of difficult walking even in daylight to reach the abode of Theron from the acropolis; and to-night, amid the heavy darkness, and in their exhausted condition, both Charmides and his brother were completely spent before the friendly light of their home became visible in front of them. The house was well built, of stone covered with the usual stucco, brightly colored without and prettily frescoed within. The rooms above ground numbered only four; while beneath the living-room, reached by a flight of stone steps, was a cellar stored with a goodly number of amphoræ filled with wine of varied make and excellence—most of it from vines that covered the much-disputed Egestan plain; some, of more celebrated vintage, sent up from Syracuse.

Theron's wife, Heraia, and Doris, the pretty slave, their day's spinning and embroidery ended, were busy preparing the evening meal. Heraia was not a little anxious over the absence of her husband and her two sons through the whole of the storm, and she was particularly uneasy about Charmides, whom she loved more with the tenderness felt for a daughter than for a son. Some time since she had despatched Sardeis, the male slave, to the sheep-run, to see if the rhapsode's flock had been safely housed, and if there were any signs of the shepherd's return. And the matron had herself gone many times to the door and looked forth into the oft-illuminated darkness in the hope that the storm was abating. A stew of goat's flesh steamed fragrantly in the kettle by the fire, and Doris kneaded cakes of ground corn that were to be laid before the fire immediately upon Theron's return. Heraia was setting the table with plates and drinking-cups, when suddenly Phalaris threw open the door. His appearance was not reassuring. Doris gave a faint shriek, and Heraia cried, in great anxiety:

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"Thy father—and Charmides—where are they? You are half fainting, Phalaris! Come in. What has happened?"

"The others are with me, just behind, bringing up a Phœnician from the galley that went on the rocks below the acropolis. Here they are."

The other three at that moment appeared out of the darkness beyond the door-way. Theron and the stranger in front, Charmides lagging weakly in the rear. Heraia sighed with relief at beholding them, wet, bedraggled, and spent as they were. Phalaris, and the stranger, about whose legs the long, soaked tunic flapped uncomfortably, and Charmides, whose wet skin was of the color and texture of polished ivory, were all three shivering with cold. Theron, then, as the

only unspent one of the party, cried out, vigorously:

"Heraia, there must be wine, food, and dry garments for us all, especially for this Phœnician, who, driven from his ship by wind, wave, and rock, seeks shelter at our hands, and is for the night our honored guest. He—"

"—proffers thanks to you and to the protecting gods for rescue from the waters and reception into your home," put in the stranger, gracefully, if with some languor.

Heraia merely smiled her welcome as her eyes flashed once over his swarthy face; and then, as one long accustomed to such demands upon her resources, she took command of the situation. From a carved chest on one side of the room she brought dry raiment for them all, despatching her boys first to their room with it while she stopped the Phœnician for a moment with an apology.

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"I have no vestment to offer that can equal yours in texture and color," she said, regretfully, gazing with admiring eyes on the long, yellow tunic, with its deep borders of the wonderful Tyrian purple which no amount of sea-water could dim and no sun of the tropics fade to a paler hue. "But at least it shall be carefully dried and stretched smooth upon the frame. Now if you will but follow Charmides"—she pointed to a door-way leading to the next room—"wine shall be carried to you while you dress, and food will be ready before you are. Go then at once."

Smiling to himself at her woman's tongue, the Phœnician very willingly obeyed her behest, and joined the two young men in their room. Here the three of them rubbed one another back into a glow of warmth, while Theron, in another chamber, doffed his rain-soaked vestment for a gayly bordered tunic, and pretty Doris, in the living-room, still knelt before the fire over her well-kneaded cakes.

Half an hour later the family and their guest, all much refreshed by the combination of wine and warmth, seated themselves on stools round the table, where various dishes were set forth about a big jar of mellow wine. Doris, upon whose graceful figure Phalaris' eyes were often seen to rest, while the stranger glanced at her once or twice in contemplative admiration, poured wine as it was wanted into the wrought-metal cups, and took care that no one lacked for food. Presently Theron, perceiving that his guest's spirits were rising under the genial influence of the Syracusan product, began to question him concerning his voyage.

The Greeks, out of courtesy, spoke in the Phœnician tongue, which, owing to their proximity to the easterly Phœnician settlements, and their constant trading intercourse with the Carthaginians, they spoke with some fluency. The stranger, with equal politeness and with more difficulty, made his replies in the language of his hosts.

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"Your race, indeed, are daring travellers. It is said that the Phœnician biremes have been known to pass the pillars of Hercules beyond the setting sun. Tell us, have you ever looked upon that outer stream of water that flows round the plain of earth?"

Kabir laughed. "The sea that lies beyond the Herculean pillars is not part of the stream that surrounds the earth. I have but now come from far beyond those little mountains. We left Tyre seven months ago, at the beginning of the rainy season, touching at Carthage and her colonies on the coast of Hispania. Then we passed the pillars, and sailed away to that far, cold country of savages where we go for a kind of dye-plant with which the natives stain their bodies blue, and for a bright metal which they dig from the earth, but which is not found in the East. The savages there are gentle enough with us. They like our warm, woollen cloth, and our weapons, and brass-work, and our jewelry. This time, when we had finished our trading on their shores, we took one of them on board with us to guide us up the northern sea to the cold land of Boreas. Across this frozen country, through forests and over hills, among fierce native tribes, we Phœnicians have made a road which leads us farther north, to the shores of an inner sea in whose waters are to be found marvellous gems of a bright yellow color, sometimes clear as glass, again thick, like unpolished gold. These we gather and carry home with us, to be cut into ornaments for our princes and their wives, and for our temple-fanes. They sell them to us for our cloth, these dwellers by the sea. Then we return, by the way we came, to our ship. This is the third time that I, master-trader of the *Fish of Tyre*, have, by the favor of Baal and Melkart, accomplished the journey."

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The exceptionally modest recital ended in a burst of genuine wonderment and admiration from the auditors. Finally, when the requisite questions and compliments had been passed, Phalaris observed, curiously:

"The sailors of your galley—they have travelled very far. Are they well-disciplined men?"

Kabir nodded. "They are as good at sails and ropes and as fearless in distant seas as they were at ease in the water to-day. You saw them?"

Phalaris gave a chuckle. "If you, master-trader, are as good at making a bargain as you are at floating, then indeed must the savages of the North be rueful after your departure. But your rowers—the slaves—they also are trustworthy and patient?"

Kabir's pale face suddenly flushed. "The dogs! By the hand of Moloch, if I had had my way, every man of them would lie with a slit nose to-night! It was they that wrecked our galley to-day. For a month we have been on the verge of an outbreak from them. They have complained forever about everything—their food, their places, their chains, the length of the voyage, too little rest. Latterly

it has been a risk each night when we loosened their bonds to let them sleep. And this afternoon, long before the storm, their insolence had become unbearable. For three hours their master, Sydyk, and Eshmun and I stood whipping them to their work. The wind was on us while we were still below, and Taker, Eshmun's cousin, fool that he was, forbore to have the sail drawn. It was not till we were facing the full gale and those panic-stricken dogs pulling like madmen to keep us off the rocks, that Eshmun went up to see what could be done. At the moment when he reached the deck the sail was blown into shreds, and we were spun round as if Scylla herself had caught us. Hearing a great clamor above them, and feeling the ship suddenly reel under their oars, every slave in the hold fell forward on his face, shrieking out prayers to Baal and giving no heed to the bloody lashes that we still whirled over their heads. Both Sydyk and I foresaw that thing which shortly happened; and at the moment when the galley was first thrown between the rocks, we reached the upper air, finding Eshmun ready to descend once more that he might unchain the slaves, who would otherwise drown during the night at their posts. Sydyk, however, vowed that not one of them should live, in consequence of their rebellious folly. When the dispute between them was thus begun, I, unwisely, interposed, advising speedy escape for ourselves, letting the animals below live or perish as they would. They might certainly survive till morning, since by now we could plainly perceive that the galley could not sink, wedged as she was in the rocks. So the discussion continued, and was in no way concluded between the two of them when you saw me leave the vessel and start for shore. I can float, but I cannot swim as well as most children, and I needed what strength was mine to get me to land. Besides this, I was most wet, most chilled, and fagged enough with the unpleasant events of the afternoon. Therefore let us drink another libation to the gods, who led me to-night under the shadow of your kindly roof."

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This short explanation of the trouble on the galley over which the citizens of Selinous had so wondered that afternoon, was listened to with great interest, and received various comments. Phalaris strongly sympathized with Kabir's disgust with the slaves. Theron expressed more temperate ideas; and Heraia gently voiced her pity for the unfortunate wretches. Charmides, who was entirely of his mother's mind, remained silent. When the discussion had lost its vigor, he rose from the table, and, moving rather aimlessly to the door, opened it to look out.

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"It will soon be too warm, mother, for your fire," he said. "The clouds have parted, and the great night-star hangs in the heavens."

The chance remark brought silence to the little party, and they sat absently watching the shepherd who had halted in the door-way, his white profile silhouetted against the outer blackness. Kabir, especially, gazed on him in growing admiration.

"By Hercules!" he observed, softly, to Phalaris, "thy brother's form would make a fitting Tammuz for the great Istar of Babylon!"

Charmides chanced to catch the last words of this sentence, and he slowly turned his head. "Istar of Babylon," he asked. "Who is she?"

The Phœnician regarded him intently. "They call you a rhapsode," he said.

Charmides nodded.

"And you have not heard of the living goddess?"

"The living goddess!" came from three mouths at once.

"Listen then. It is a fitting subject for the lyre."

II THE VOW

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Charmides, with a look of unusual curiosity in his face, left his post and crossed to the fireplace, seating himself upon the ground before it. During the story that followed, the shepherd's bright blue eyes sought the ruddiest depths of the leaping flames, while his expressive mouth responded to every passing thought, and the narrator was fascinated by the glory of his hair, which caught the firelight, and tossed off its burning reflection in a thousand dazzling rays, till Charmides' head was surrounded by such a halo as saint has never worn. Theron, Phalaris, and Heraia, who, however incredulous they might be, could not but be struck by the stranger's theme, gathered closer to him, and listened with an intensity flattering enough to spur Kabir to great efforts in his narrative. He, however, well aware that, at his best, he could never dream of rivalling the Greek professional in this art of arts, chose rather to treat his subject in the simplest possible manner.

"Two years ago, in the fourteenth year of the reign of Nabu-Nahid, King of Babylon,^[3] men say that Istar, the great goddess—our Astarte—Aphrodite to you—came in the flesh to Babylon. For three days and three nights flames of white fire hung over the temples of Bel, of Marduk, and of Nebo, while the images of the gods in their shrines chanted unceasingly in an unknown tongue. On the morning of the fourth day the hierodules attached to the temple of Istar, ascending her ziggurat to the sanctuary on the seventh stage, found the goddess herself, asleep upon her golden couch.

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"How she awoke, what she said to her priestesses, or in what manner she first descended to take up her abode in the temple below, I have never heard. But before a month was past, all Babylon, and in three months all the East, from Sidon to Gaza, and from Ur to Damascus, rang with the wonder of her divinity and her beauty. It is now long since I heard of her, having been so many months away from my country. But formerly every caravan that came from the great city held some that had seen her, or perhaps had heard her speak, and throngs would assemble in the marketplaces to listen to the least story of her personality. It was said—"

"Yes, yes. She was beautiful, you say? How beautiful? How did she look?" interrupted Charmides, in stumbling haste.

Kabir, noting the flush upon the shepherd's cheek, smiled a little to himself. "She is the most fair of any goddess, yet none has ever beheld so much as her face quite clearly, it is said. Always she is surrounded by a dazzling white radiance, an aureole, which the strongest eyes have not been able to pierce. Yet men declare that her face has the clear whiteness of alabaster, her eyes are like the moon, and her hair like a floating, silken veil. More I cannot truthfully say.

"Her vestments have been offered her by the King himself and by the priests of the great gods. They are such as Nitokris never wore and queens might sigh over with envy. Yet they seem too coarse and poor to proffer to such a being.

"The first sign of Istar's divinity is the music that continually follows her presence. They say that those who hear the sounds as she passes are overcome, and fall upon the dust, or reel away like drunken men affected by fumes of wine. What this music is—bells or chords of the lyre or notes from the flute—no man has ever told, for when the sounds cease, every memory of them, save that of the ecstasy of listening, leaves him who has heard. And at sunset every night, when the goddess has retired to her sanctuary to commune with the great gods in solitude, there issue from the ziggurat sounds so marvellous that the priestesses and hierodules flee the neighborhood of the tower in the fear that, hearing, they may lose their reason.

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"Istar is possessed of all knowledge. She speaks to each man in his native tongue—Chaldaic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Phœnician, or Egyptian—and on feast days she converses with the gods, her brothers, in that unknown language spoken by their statues. Bel and Nebo come forth from their shrines to receive her; Marduk and Shamash embrace her, their sister. Sin, her father, sends to her temple blood-offerings and heave-offerings of oxen and of doves."

"And men," asked the shepherd, still staring into the flames—"what do the men who have eyes to look upon her?"

"Of those that have dared, some become as children that know no more what they do. A few, it is said, have died, but these she raises from the kingdom of death and returns again to the world to fulfil their rightful time. Others still have given their manhood in order to join the order of temple-servants attached to her sanctuary.

"For all these reasons the temple of Istar has become more famous than any other in the East, and the name of Istar, the living goddess, is in every mouth. Many Egyptians from Memphis and Thebes have taken the long journey to Babylon for the purpose of beholding her; and in the land of the Nile each man prays that Isis may show her people favor and appear before them incarnate. She has shaken the faith of the Jews in their one God. Phrygia and Lydia send yearly offerings to her in the great city. And in Tyre itself we were to build a new temple to Astarte, where a six months' sacrifice and festival would be held, in the hope that our great goddess of fertility might appear before us in her double form. And that, O Charmides, is all that I can relate to you concerning the Lady of Babylon."

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"It seems that Charmides sleeps over the tale, or else that he is drunken with the mere thought of the divine personage. Wake, rhapsode! Tune your lyre and sing for us the inspired ode that hangs upon your lips!" cried Phalaris, rather ill-naturedly, and with a supercilious smile at his brother.

Charmides did not stir. A thoughtful frown puckered his forehead, and he appeared oblivious of Phalaris' mockery. Theron, seeing that the Phœnician was a little crestfallen with the ill-success of his story, made haste to express his interest in it, and to ask a further question or two upon the matter, without, however, infusing much enthusiasm into his tone. Heraia followed her husband's lead with less effort. She had in her the original strain of poetry that had been extended to her younger son, but was entirely lacking in Theron and Phalaris. Therefore, being imaginative and a woman, Heraia had no difficulty in crediting Kabir's words, and she also understood Charmides' present mood as none of the others could.

Now ensued a pause extremely uncomfortable to three of the group. Only Phalaris was undisturbed by, and Charmides oblivious of, its distressing length. The shepherd finally turned his head and shifted his gaze to the Phœnician's face, where his eyes remained fixed for two or three minutes in a contemplative scrutiny. Then he drew a long breath, returned into the present, and, rising, moved slowly to the door again. From there he glanced at his mother, and was about to speak, when Phalaris reached over to the chest near which he sat, drew forth from it a lyre inlaid with ivory, and held it out to his brother.

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"A hymn, Charmides, to Astarte. I can read one written in your eyes."

Charmides flushed scarlet. The eyes of the stranger were on him, and he felt a sudden pang of inexpressible shame at the laughter of his brother's tone.

"Have no fear, little athlete!" he responded, slowly, "an ode will be ready for you when you overthrow Theocles in the festival games. But I think I need not hurry in composing it. Morpheus attend you all. I am going to my bed." And, turning upon his heel, without looking at the still proffered instrument, he strode off to the room which he was to share with Phalaris and the stranger.

Charmides' anger always passed as rapidly as it rose. To-night, by the time he had disrobed and made his prayer to Apollo and Father Zeus, his mind was once more in a state of truce with Phalaris, and he determined to make peace with his brother as soon as he found opportunity; for Phalaris felt the sting of a sharp speech till it was healed by the balm of a very humble apology.

Once ready for the night the shepherd drew his light couch under the one unshuttered window of the room, and laid him down so that his eyes might rest upon the heavens before he slept, and where he could watch the rising of the sun when he woke again. By this time the last shred of the storm-cloud had disappeared from on high, and the moon, which was all but in the full, flooded the night with silver. Its luminous radiance melted over the shepherd's face and caused his locks to shine palely. Charmides lay watching the beams with wide-open eyes. In spite of his very unusual exertions of the afternoon, and the nervous strain that he had endured in watching for men from the wreck, he had never been further from sleep than to-night. His mind was unusually active, and, try as he would, he could not turn his thoughts from one subject—the thing that Phalaris had tried to shame away, the incredible tale told by the Phœnician about the Aphrodite of the East. Charmides knew well enough how his father and brother would laugh at him for allowing himself to think seriously for one moment about that idealized being, who, in all probability, lived only in the depths of the trader's imagination. Nevertheless, Kabir's few words had conjured up to Charmides' quick fancy a singularly real shape, and in the solitary night his thoughts played about her continually, now with eager delight, again reluctantly and irresistibly. Once, twice, thrice he tried to escape from her, but she refused to be banished. He saw her slipping down towards him from a great height, on the path of a moonbeam. With a sigh of renunciation he resolutely turned his head. Still she did not go. Nay, flashing in an aureole of white light, her face veiled from him, divinity crying from every curve of her figure, she advanced more definitely than before, from the corners of the room. A quiver of painful delight stirred Charmides' heart. He closed his eyes. Then she came out of the depths of his own brain, in a sea of rainbow mist, with faint chimes of distant bells ringing around her, a veil of silken hair covering her beneath the mantle of light. At last he was quite beneath her spell. Fragments of hexameter, of great beauty and great indistinctness, rose in his mind. And presently, lo! an ode, the first of any depth that had ever come to him, became possible. Here were the first lines of it, lying ready to his tongue. He whispered them once to himself, delightedly, and then banished them with resolution. He must first obtain his form. The structure must be broad enough adequately to express the thought born in him by the secret inspiration of the night.

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An hour passed, and the white light of the moon crept slowly over the shepherd's head into the far corners of the room. Charmides lay with closed eyes and lips compressed, the vision growing clearer and his task more intricate. Mere words began to be inadequate. How many men, how many women, how many lifeless things, even, have been extolled in matchless syllables? And how was he as far to surpass all these lines as his subject surpassed the subjects of his predecessors? He grew more and more troubled, and the labor of his mind was painful. Intoxication was gone. The time of work, of unexalted concentration, was upon him. Into the midst of this second stage, however, came Phalaris and Kabir, sleepy, yet talking pleasantly together in unsubdued tones. Charmides clenched his hand, but did not uncloset his eyes. For twenty minutes he lay in an agony of broken thought. Then his self-control was rewarded. He was left alone once more in the night, with only the light, regular breathing of two unconscious men to disturb his thoughts.

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Through the misty hours sleep did not visit the shepherd, yet neither did he accomplish his desire. He watched the pale moon faint from the sky and the white stars melt, one by one, into the tender dawn. Sunrise found him spent, exhausted, and bitter with disappointment; for the burning night had left no trace of its fever save in deep circles under his eyes and a hungering anxiety over something that he could not name.

Theron and Phalaris were up betimes, and, before they had finished the morning libation, were joined by Charmides and Kabir. During breakfast the stranger talked to Theron about the galley, and the length of time it would take before she could be rendered fit to continue again upon her voyage.

"You were going home?" asked the Selinuntian.

"Yes. We should stop at the Sikelian cities as far as Syracuse, passing then eastward through the islands, touching at Crete, Naxos, perhaps, and Cyprus. Our voyage had been too long already."

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"Well, if you are ready," observed Theron, rising, "we will go down to the shore at once to find out the condition of the galley. And while you remain in Selinous, Kabir, we beg that you will make our hearth your home."

The Phœnician gratefully expressed his thanks. Then, as Theron and Phalaris moved together towards the door, evidently expecting him to follow them, Kabir turned to Charmides, who remained in the background.

"Do you not come with us?" he asked.

The Greek hurriedly shook his head. "I take the flock to pasture," he explained; and so the

Phœnician turned away.

By the time the three men reached the shore below the city, the sun was two hours high and the beach was lined with Selinuntians and Tyrians, all talking together about the best method for pulling the galley from between the two rocks where she still lay, fast wedged. As soon as Kabir made his appearance a tall fellow, in a deep-red robe, hurried up to him with expressions of delight. Kabir saluted him as an equal, and presently brought him up to Theron and Phalaris, introducing him as Eshmun, captain of the *Fish of Tyre*. Then followed among the four of them an earnest conversation as to the length of time needed for repairs after the ship was once more in clear water.

"Prayers and libations to Melkart and Baal have been offered up," observed Eshmun, piously, "and men in the city are already at work making new oars. Yonder on the beach are all the small boats, which are to be manned by our sailors and the young men of the city. They, proceeding to the *Fish*, will lay hold of her stern with ropes, and, all pulling in the same direction, by the aid of the gods we shall hope to get her out."

"And the galley-slaves?" queried Kabir. "What has been done with them?"

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"May Bacchus confound them! Last night, before leaving the ship, I persuaded Sydyk into loosening their chains, and when Sydyk, at sunrise, reached the galley, he found every man of them sprawled out on deck in a drunken sleep. They had used up four casks of the best Massilian wine! Sydyk had them whipped back to their places, where they are now chained, waiting to help push the ship off with their unbroken oars."

Up to this point Theron and his son stood beside Kabir, listening attentively to the Phœnician tongue, which was just unfamiliar enough to demand close attention. But now Phalaris, seeing that the small boats were being rapidly manned, went off to join one of them. Theron walked leisurely after his son towards a group of elders, leaving Kabir with Eshmun. For ten or fifteen minutes the Tyrians continued their conversation, and then, the fleet of rowboats being ready to put off, the captain hurried away to take command of the operations, and his companion was left alone upon the shore.

Kabir, as master-trader of the vessel, was under no obligation to do anything towards the assistance of the wreck. Few men, perhaps, would have considered this freedom as a reason for actually taking no part in the affair of the moment. But Kabir was one of these few. He was by nature a true Phœnician, and by cultivation a true merchant: thoroughly indolent where his immediate advantage was not concerned; good-natured because good-nature made men more pliable to his secret will; keen as a knife-blade, and quite indefatigable in any matter that concerned his or his employer's profit; indifferent to the weal or woe of his nearest friend, so long as by that woe or weal his own comfort was unconcerned. He stood now on the beach below the acropolis, content to be alone, sufficiently occupied with the scenes of beauty and activity before him. There, far to the south and east, stretched the sea, smooth and blue, sprinkled with sun-sparkles, a lolling roll half-concealed in its mischievous depths, otherwise bearing not a trace of last night's spasm of rage. From the very edge of the beach out to a distance of two hundred yards from shore, was a jumble of brown rocks, large and small, between which the water ran in little, opalescent eddies, forming a dangerous and threatening boundary to the west side of the otherwise peaceful harbor. Between two of these horned rocks lay the barnacled, dismasted ship, which had ventured so far into distant, perilous seas, to be brought to bay at last, wounded and weary, by the shock of a merry Sicilian thunderstorm. Half-way between ship and shore thirty small boats, plied vigorously by friendly Greek and anxious Tyrian, were making a flashing progress to the galley's side; while all along the shore white-robed Selinuntian elders and fair-faced Doric women watched with high interest the movements of the boats.

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Once and again Kabir overlooked the scene. Then, tired of standing, and undesirous of spending the whole morning inactively, he turned and looked around him, up the rocky height of the temple-crowned acropolis. An ascent into the city seemed the most feasible method of amusement. Therefore he proceeded leisurely towards the nearest upward path, when, somewhat to his amazement, he perceived the figure of Charmides coming rapidly towards him along the beach. The moment his eyes met those of the youth the shepherd's pace grew perceptibly slower.

"I will avoid him, then," thought the Phœnician, calmly, and thereupon, with a distant salutation, he started forward once more to the upward path. To his further surprise this act brought Charmides hastily to his side.

"Where is thy flock, O rhapsode?" inquired Kabir, lightly, in the manner of Phalaris.

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"In care of Sardeis. I was seeking you."

"And your purpose? What may I do?"

"N—nothing. I thought you might desire, perhaps, to see the city. Shall I conduct you to the agora? Would you like to see our temples?—and the statues?—and the new pediment that Eumenides is making for the basilica?"

"Very much. I was, indeed, just about to go alone up to the city," replied Kabir, courteously. But while the youth began abruptly to ascend the path in front of him, Kabir was wondering, in rather a puzzled way, what could be the reason for the young Greek's sudden solicitude for his amusement, and for the want of interest in what should have been his first object of inquiry—the

galley's rescue from the rocks.

The two of them passed in silence through the well-kept street that led to the agora from the west, and had almost reached the height of the acropolis before a further word was spoken between them. Kabir's curiosity was turning to amusement, and he was inclined to put the shepherd down as half-witted, when the boy turned on him and burst out, as if driven to the speech:

"Kabir, tell me, was that that you were saying last night—about the goddess of Babylon—true or not? Is there such a being, or is she but an invention of your mind? I conjure you, if you have pity, tell me the truth!"

As he spoke, Charmides, from being very pale, had flushed crimson, and his young eyes burned with unquenchable fire. A sudden, unique revelation was borne in upon the Phœnician, and he willingly passed over the blunt suggestion in the shepherd's question, in the pleasure of finding what was, to him, an entirely novel bent of mind. While they proceeded, then, on their way to the market-place, Kabir replied to the substance of Charmides' new queries.

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"I told you the truth last evening, shepherd; as much truth, indeed, as I knew. I myself have never been in Babylon, and therefore have not, with mine own eyes, seen the goddess. But others, my friends, on returning to Tyre from the great city, have been able to talk of nothing but Istar, this living divinity. Yet it is many months since I was at home. By now she may have returned to the skies, from which, they say, she came. But that there was once such a being on earth I know; else I and all men of the East are gone suddenly demented."

"But her face—how do you imagine it? Her form—is it like a woman's? Tell me, Kabir! Tell me more of her!"

"How can I, never having looked upon her? How shall I imagine what no man, seeing, knows?"

"Surely you know of the music that surrounds her. Whence does it appear to come? Is it the sound of lyre or flute; or perhaps of many instruments together? Perhaps some hint of its melody is—"

"Shepherd, shepherd! Have I not told you that I know nothing of it? Said I not last night that that music drove mad those that listened? Lyres! Flutes! How could I know? How should I guess?"

"It is unbearable, this yearning. I am kept from sleep. I cannot eat. I am haunted by a face that I cannot see, lines that will not rise out of the chaos in which they lie. And no man will tell me what he knows. No man—no man."

The shepherd muttered these words to himself so incoherently that Kabir could scarcely distinguish one from another. Suddenly, however, Charmides lifted his head and looked at the Phœnician with a deep sadness in his eyes. "Kabir!" he exclaimed, softly, "I am possessed!"

"Truly, I think you are!" growled the trader to himself. But with Charmides he abruptly changed the subject of conversation, and said, in a very different tone, with a phlegmatic smile: "It is my turn for questioning now. We are here in the agora, and you have told me as yet nothing of the temples, which are, so far as I can judge, most worthy of their gods."

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Charmides restrained a sigh of impatience, but his disappointment showed plainly in his face. However, his native courtesy and his training in hospitality did not desert him, and for the next hour he devoted himself to his task so successfully that Kabir was well pleased with him. The boy's effort to keep his mind fixed upon immediate matters did not escape the Phœnician, who, before the morning was over, conceived a very different idea of the shepherd's character. On the whole, the last half of the morning was much more enjoyable to him than the first.

At this time, in the spring of the five hundred and thirty-ninth year before the birth of Christ, the Hyblean city was in the height of its prosperity as an independent Doric colony; and its citizens had taken a generous and a reverent pride in the adornment of their acropolis and of the opposite hill, both of which were wreathed with temples which, in conception and erection, will never be surpassed. Kabir looked appreciatively at the agora, surrounded as it was with the fluted columns of the sanctuaries of Demeter, Apollo, and Zeus, and the somewhat too square basilica. The market-place teemed with life. A sacrifice and prayer to Father Zeus was in progress, and white-robed priests passed to and fro among the youths and maids of the open school, the slaves who came for water from the central fountain, or the venders of grains, fruit, and flowers that accosted one at every step. Passing out of the agora, after a considerable time spent in viewing its pleasant gayety, the stranger and his shepherd guide went back to examine the stone fort which rendered this eminence utterly impregnable upon its north side; and then they followed the high stone wall southward along the edge of the cliff till they reached the southeastern gate of Hystaspes. Through this Charmides passed rapidly, and led the way along well-paved streets down into the valley of the Hypsas River, which separated the acropolis from the east hill. Crossing the little bridge on foot, the two began their second ascent up the eminence where stood Charmides' home, near which were three other temples—one to Hecate, one to Hera, and the third, half finished, dedicated to the patron god of the city, Apollo, and destined to be the largest temple of them all and the third largest in the Greek world.

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The walk had proved long, and the last part of the way was difficult. Kabir was glad enough to sit and rest in the portico of Hera's shrine, looking out over the brow of the hill down to the rocky harbor where the galley still obstinately stuck. Charmides had ceased to talk, and his companion

asked no more questions about the city. It was in perfect amicability, yet in perfect silence, that the two finished their short walk to Theron's house. The young Greek had fallen into a reverie from which it would have been difficult to rouse him; and he moved with his eyes fixed sometimes in the clouds, more often on the ground, while his mouth drooped and his expression grew more and more grave. Kabir glanced occasionally at his companion, needing no interpreter to determine the subject of his thoughts, but himself far more interested in the question as to whether there would be meat, or merely bread, cheese, wine, and fruit at the noon meal to which they were going.

As it turned out, there was mutton, well spitted, and done to a turn, a double portion of which was easily obtainable, for Phalaris did not come up from the harbor, and Charmides sat staring absently into space, while Theron, Heraia, and their guest ate and discussed the events of the morning. The galley, it appeared, had been moved a little, but was not yet completely out of the clutches of the rocks. It was hoped, however, that by nightfall she would, by the combined strength of the oars and the small boats, be got off and safely beached in a spot where the carpenters could begin work upon her crushed sides and torn bottom.

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"It will be a matter of fifteen days, however, before she can continue her voyage. There is far more to be done upon her than we thought at first. Meantime, O Kabir, our dwelling is yours."

"May the gods duly requite your hospitality, good friends!" returned Kabir, as the four of them rose from the table.

After the meal Kabir went down into the harbor with his host, and Charmides sought the fields with his flock, not returning till an hour after sunset. The family was seated at supper when he appeared. His unusual tardiness elicited a remark or two from his father; but Heraia, reading the weariness in his eyes, forbore to question him. It required forbearance, indeed, for she found something in the shepherd's face that had not been there before; and on the meaning of it she speculated in vain.

In spite of the fact that he had eaten little at noon, and that his afternoon had been unusually long, Charmides took nothing to-night. Kabir watched him discreetly, interested in his state, the cause of which he alone so much as suspected. Phalaris was weary after his long day at the oars, and showed his displeasure with his brother for making no inquiry as to the galley's progress by utterly ignoring Charmides after the first word of greeting. The rather uncomfortable meal at an end, Heraia ventured a customary request.

"Come, Charmides, get thy lyre or flute, and play to us. The sheep have been hearing thee all afternoon. Give us, also, music to-night."

None of the others echoed the request. Theron rarely encouraged either son in his chosen profession, though he was as interested in their success as they themselves. Phalaris still sulked, unnoticed; and the Phœnician was too anxious for an opportunity of judging his new protégé's ability to risk protest by undue urging. He was fortunate in choosing the passive course. At his mother's request, Charmides rose at once and brought out his well-strung lyre. Seating himself in a corner of the open door-way, and looking out upon the night, he struck two or three thin, minor chords. Then, in a voice whose limpid tenor Kabir had never heard equalled, he sang. It was a melody well known to all Greeks, but transposed from the major to the minor key. The words were Charmides' own—of exquisite simplicity—twenty lines on the grief and weariness of a lost Pleiad. It rose gradually to a plaintive climax, and ended in a tired pianissimo. There was no applause. None of his audience and neither of the slaves cared to break silence as the shepherd rose and returned the instrument to its place. Kabir thirsted for more; and presently Theron, with a little effort, asked, softly:

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"Why do you stop?"

"Father, I am tired. Grant me permission to go to my bed."

"Permission need not be asked. Get thee away, and the gods send you dreamless sleep."

Half an hour later Phalaris and the Phœnician followed the shepherd's example, and Theron and his wife also sought a willing rest. The athlete made quick work of preparing for the night, and, almost upon the instant of his lying down, fell fast asleep. Kabir was slower. He had disrobed as promptly as his companion, but he did not immediately lay him down. As on the previous evening, the window was open, and the moonlight streamed over Charmides' bed. Kabir stole across the room to look out upon the night, moving noiselessly, that he might not disturb the shepherd, who, since the others entered the room, had lain motionless. The Phœnician, standing over him, brought his eyes slowly from the moon to the fair face below him, and gave a quick, unfeigned start to find Charmides' eyes wide open, staring up at him. Neither of them spoke. Kabir, in unaccountable confusion, quickly returned to his own couch and lay down upon it, far wider awake than he had been ten minutes before.

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Now ensued a period of silence and of uneasiness. The shepherd, his form flooded with silver light, lay immovable, eyes still unclosed, hands clenched, brain on fire, listening mechanically to the regular breathing of Phalaris, and waiting eagerly, anxiously, tensely, for the same sound from the couch of the Phœnician. His nerves, too highly strung, twitched and pulled. His body gradually grew numb. And still, while he waited, ears pricked, eyes brilliant, Kabir refused to sleep. The moon rode in mid-heavens before the sign came. At last the faint snores sounded like muffled drum-taps, one—two—three—four—five. A long sigh escaped Charmides' lips. For one

blessed instant his muscles relaxed. Then he rose swiftly, drew on his day tunic, threw about him the chlamys that Phalaris had worn, and slipped noiselessly from the room. For a moment after his disappearance everything remained quiet behind him. Then, suddenly, Kabir's snores ceased, and he sat cautiously up. Yes, Charmides was really gone. The Phœnician rose and passed over to the door. The living-room was empty and the outer door open to the night. Throwing on as much clothing as he needed in the mild air, the trader hurried outside and looked about him, first towards the sea, then along the path to the city. Upon this, walking swiftly, and already far on his moonlit way, went the shepherd. Kabir, with a kind of wonderment at his own curiosity, started at a half-run to follow.

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Evidently Charmides was bound for a definite spot. He moved straight along through the rank grass, gorse, and wild onion that here took the place of near-growing daisies and sweet alyssum, and, looking neither to the right nor left, passed along the path to the acropolis.

The shepherd was acting on what was hardly an impulse. His strange action had been irresistibly impelled by some force emanating from his own mind, and yet *not* of himself. He wished to be upon consecrated ground, in the precincts of a temple, where, it seemed to him, the burning thirst of his imagination might be quenched. In obedience to his guiding voice, he left behind him the temples of the hill on which he lived, and made his way towards the abode of his patron god of the Silver Bow, who had for years been worshipped on the acropolis, and whose immense temple on the other hill was still unfinished. Charmides had brought with him his lyre, again obeying the impulse, though without any idea of how he was to use it. He accomplished most of his journey, indeed, without thought of any kind; and not till the last, sharp ascent up the acropolis road was begun did it occur to him that, at this hour of the night, he might not pass the guard at the gate. The thought, when it came, scarcely troubled him. He would go at least as far as he could. He passed rapidly up the steep slope, Kabir following noiselessly; and, as they drew near the gate of Dawn, the southeastern opening in the defending wall, Charmides saw a strange thing. The guard, one of a long-trained company for whom discovered slumber at his post meant death, sat squat upon the ground, his helmeted head bowed between his knees, sunk in a deep sleep. The passage into the agora was open. Charmides and the other passed into the empty square, finally pausing before the portico of the temple of Apollo.

A scene of supernal beauty confronted them. The great market-place, filled from dawn to dusk with murmurous life of the city, was robbed by night in ineffable stillness. All around, the white columns rose in shadowy beauty to their high architraves; while the ground below was barred with fluted shadows. The warm, perfume-laden air was heavy with the essence of spring. Below, on the sides of the hill, the city lay asleep; and the only sound that broke the universal silence was the distant, musical swish of the rising tide.

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In the midst of this Charmides stood, half panting, his overwrought mind in a state of blankness. Then, still passively obeying his guiding impulse, he ascended the two steps that led into the portico of the temple of Apollo, and, after hesitating for a moment, entered the open door-way. By the light of the two sacred torches that burned throughout the night by the altar of the god, the youth made his way to the high-walled fane, within which was the celebrated statue of the Patron of Selinous. Here, in the dim, bluish light, with the cool stillness above and around him, and the divine presence very near, the shepherd fell upon one knee and bowed his head in a prayer, the words of which rose to his lips without any effort of thought on his part, and were more beautiful than any that he had ever heard spoken by priest or poet.

When he had finished he did not rise. It seemed to him that, if he but dared to lift his eyes, he should see the Lord of the Silver Bow above him, in all his blinding radiance. Charmides' head swam. A cloud of faintest incense enveloped him. His parted lips drank in air that affected him like rare old wine. A fine intoxication stole upon all his senses. He waited, breathlessly, for that which he knew at last was to come. Yet in the beginning of the miracle his heart for a long moment ceased to beat, and he swayed forward till he lay prone upon the marble pavement.

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A sound, a long note, thin and bright and finely drawn as silver wire, was quivering down from the dusk of the uppermost vault. On it spun, and on, over the head of the listener, whose every nerve quivered beneath the spell of its vibration. Time had ceased for him, and he did not know whether it was a moment or an hour before the single note became two, then three, and gradually many more, which mingled and melted together in a stream of delicious harmony, so strange, so marvellous, that the shepherd strained ears and brain in an agony lest he should fail to catch a single tone. But the low Æolian chimes grew fainter after a little while; and then, at the pianissimo, there entered into their midst something that no man of earth had as yet dreamed of—a mighty organ note, that rose and swelled through the moving air in a peal of such majesty that Charmides, trembling with his temerity, rose to his feet and looked up. Nothing unusual was to be seen in the temple room. Half-way down, between the frescoed columns, burned the two torches before the empty altar. Yes, and there, in the shadow of the wall, stood Kabir, the Phœnician, watching quietly the movements of the shepherd. Charmides perceived him, but failed to wonder at his presence. It was natural that any one should wish to be here to-night. Yet how could any living man stand unmoved in the midst of such a glory of sound as whirled about him now? The lyre music rose anew to a great fortissimo, high above the deeply resonant chords of the sky-organ. Flutes and trumpets, and the minor notes of myriad plaintive flageolets, and a high-pealing chime of silver-throated bells joined in swinging harmony, finally resolving into such a pæan of praise that Charmides was carried back to the memories of many a former dream. Shaking the dripping sweat from his forehead, he stepped forward a pace or two, and, lifting his lyre, joined its tones and those of his pygmy voice to the mighty orchestra. Though he was

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unaware of it, he had never sung like this before. The inspiration of his surroundings was upon him. His voice rang forth, clear as a trumpet-call. Strange and beautiful words poured from his lips; words that he had always known, yet uttered now for the first time. He was drawn far from life. He was on the threshold of another world, into which he could see dimly. There, before him, poised in ether, shining ever more distinctly through the rosy cloud that enveloped her, was the statue-like, veil-swathed form of a woman. Tall, lithe, round was the shape that he beheld—the body of a woman of earth, and yet more, and less, than that. Neither feature nor flesh could he perceive through the radiance that surrounded and emanated from her. He knew, in his heart, that this was a goddess, she whom his soul sought.

"Ishtar! Ishtar! Ishtar kâ Babilû!"

Once, twice, thrice he cried her name, in descending minor thirds, while all the bells of heaven pealed round them both.

"Ishtar of Babilû, I come to seek your city! Where you are, there I shall find you. Great Apollo, Lord of the Silver Bow, son of Latona and of Father Zeus, hear me and heed my words: I will seek the living goddess where she dwells in the land of the rising sun. To her I will proffer my homage ere the year be gone. If I fulfil not this vow, made here within thy holy temple, take thou my body for the dogs to feed upon, and let my spirit cross the river into the darkest cavern of Hades. Lord Son of Latona, hear my vow!"

With the last words Charmides sank again upon his knees, his face still uplifted to the spot whence his vision had faded into blackness. The celestial music ceased. The passionate ecstasy was gone. Weak and exhausted in body and mind, the shepherd rose, trembling, and began to move towards the entrance of the temple. The light from the sinking moon streamed white through the open door. Presently, from the shadows behind him, Kabir glided gently up to the youth, who was groping blindly forward.

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"I heard the vow," said the Phœnician, almost in a whisper. "Will you, then, sail with us when we depart again in our galley, to Tyre, on your way into Babylon of the East?"

For a moment Charmides stared at the man in wonderment. He was coming back to life. Then he nodded slowly, and with dry lips answered:

"You heard the vow. You have said it."

III INTO THE EAST

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Next morning Kabir opened his eyes earlier than might have been expected, considering his nocturnal exercise and the hour at which he had finally retired. Charmides was performing ablutions with water from an earthen jar, and talking amicably, if absent-mindedly, with his brother, who was ready dressed. The Phœnician rose hastily, and began his usual toilet, while Phalaris, after giving him morning greeting, and bidding the shepherd have a care not to drown himself, left them for the more satisfying charms of breakfast.

On their way back from the acropolis, on the previous night, Kabir and Charmides had not spoken to each other. Therefore the one question and answer before they left the temple was the only conversation they had had on the subject of the inspiration and its result. This morning, then, the moment that Phalaris disappeared, Charmides set down the water-jar, turned sharply about, and, looking searchingly into his companion's face, asked:

"Kabir—have I dreamed?"

"Dreamed? Where? How?"

A sudden light sprang into the shepherd's face. "You were not with me, then, last night, in the temple of Apollo?"

"Certainly I was—and heard the hymn you sang to the Babylonian goddess. That was an inspiration, Charmides. Can you recall the words and the rhythm this morning?"

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But Charmides shrank from the question. He had become very pale. After a long silence, during which Kabir, much puzzled, strove to understand his mood, he asked again, faintly:

"And the vow? I vowed to Apollo—"

"To seek the Babylonian goddess; to proffer her homage before the year had fallen, or—" The Phœnician stopped. Charmides held up his hand with such an imploring gesture that a sudden light broke in upon the trader. He realized now that regret for his emotional folly was strong upon the youth, and he saw no reason for not helping him to be rid of its consequences.

"You have lost the desire, O Charmides, to fulfil that vow?" he asked.

Charmides bent his head in shamed acquiescence.

"Why, then, keep it? You may trust me. I shall say not a word of the matter to any one. None but I

saw you. The guard at the gate was asleep. You are safe. Forget the matter, and be—" again he paused. Charmides was regarding him with open displeasure.

"None *saw*! What of the god, Phœnician? What of the god Apollo—my patron?"

Kabir perceived the shepherd's earnestness, and the corners of his mouth twitched. Phœnician polytheism had crossed swords, long ago, with Phœnician practicality; and the gods, it must be confessed, had been pretty well annihilated in the series of contests. Nevertheless, Kabir knew very well that he could not scoff at another's religion. He was puzzled. He tried argument, persuasion, entreaty, every form of rhetoric that occurred to him as holding out possibilities of usefulness; but all alike failed to move in the slightest degree Charmides' abject determination. The unprofitable conversation was finally ended by the shepherd's sensible proposal:

"I will lay the matter before my father this morning, Kabir, and by his decision I will abide." [Pg 45]

The Phœnician nodded approval. It was a simple solution of a puzzle which, after all, did not really concern him. As a matter of fact it would have been hard enough for him to tell why he was taking such an unaccountable interest in this impulsive and irresponsible shepherd-boy—he, a man who had cared for neither man nor woman all his life through, whose whole interest had hitherto been centred in material things. But he was, as many others had been and would be, under the influence of the peculiar charm of the young Greek, a charm that emanated not more from the incomparable beauty of his physique than from the frank and ingenuous sincerity of his manner.

At the conclusion of their peculiar conversation, the two men passed into the living-room, to find their morning meal just ready and Theron and his son sitting down to table, while Heraia still bent over the hearth where bread was baking.

Charmides gave his usual morning salutation to his father and mother, and then seated himself in silence. During the meal he said not a word, though Phalaris was in a lively mood, and conversation flowed easily enough among the others. When the athlete had risen, however, and Kabir was detaining the others by making a pretence of eating in order to watch the shepherd, Charmides turned to his father and asked, boldly:

"Father, may one break a vow made within his temple to Apollo?"

Theron looked at his son carefully. "You know that he may not. Why have you asked?"

"Because I have made such a vow. Last night, after a great vision, it was wrung from me."

Phalaris came back and seated himself quietly at the table. Then Heraia leaned forward, looking at her son as if something long expected, long hoped for, had come to pass. [Pg 46]

"A vision? Of what? Where?"

"At midnight, unable to sleep for the chaos of my thoughts, I went to the acropolis and entered into the temple of my god. There I heard the music of the gods, most marvellous, most incomprehensible; and there a great vision was before me—a silver cloud in which the goddess Istar of Babylon appeared to me and called to me. Thereupon I vowed to Apollo to set forth into the East, seeking her to whom, ere the year be fallen, I must proffer my homage."

Buoyed up by the pleasure and sympathy in his mother's eyes, Charmides had spoken quite cheerfully. Looking into her face after his last words, however, he found there something that caused his head to droop in new-found dejection, while he waited for his father's decision. It did not come. There was a heavy silence, finally broken by Phalaris, who said, a little contemptuously:

"You had a dream, Charmides. You did not leave the room in which I slept last night."

Heraia raised her head in sudden hope, but here Theron broke in:

"Nay—even if it were but a dream, the gods have more than once appeared to favored mortals in sleep."

"But this, Theron, was no dream. I followed Charmides to the temple. It is true that I saw no vision, and all the music that came to my ears was made by Charmides himself, who sang an inspired hymn to the goddess. But his vow to Apollo was most certainly made. The shepherd has spoken truth."

There was another pause. Then Theron sighed heavily and spoke. "He must abide by the vow. You, O Phœnician, will you take him in the galley to your far city, on his way to the abode of the goddess?"

"That I promised him last night."

"But," interrupted Phalaris, still incredulous, "how did you both pass the guard at the gate by which you entered the acropolis?" [Pg 47]

"He slept!" replied Charmides and Kabir, in the same breath.

Heraia let a faint sigh that was more than half sob escape her; and Charmides drew a hand across his brow. "You bid me go, father?" he said.

Theron hesitated. Finally, in a tone of grave reproval, he replied, "It is not I that can bid you go. You yourself owe obedience to your patron god and to the strange goddess that put this thing into your heart. Though I shall lose you, though the heart of your mother is faint at the thought of your departure, yet I dare not command you to break the vow. Yes, Charmides—you must go."

A momentary spasm of pain crossed Charmides' young face, and was gone as it had come. Only by his straightened mouth could one have guessed that he was not as usual. Heraia's eyes were bright with tears which she did not allow to fall; and even Phalaris, the true Spartan of the family, who was a little scornful of his brother for permitting his feelings to betray themselves even for a moment, himself felt an unlooked-for quiver at the heart when he thought of a life empty of his girlish brother's presence. Both he and his mother sat absently looking at the rhapsode, till Theron, seeing danger of weakness in the scene, abruptly rose:

"Come, Phalaris, we will go down together to the galley. I will speak with Eshmun on behalf of Charmides. Perhaps you, also, Kabir, will care to come?"

"And I. I will work now upon the ship till she sails again. Sardeis can take the flock."

"Eager to be gone, boy?" asked Theron, smiling rather sadly; but his question needed no other answer than his son's expression. So, presently, the four men left the house, and Heraia was left alone to face this all-unexpected grief that had come to her—the loss of the child that had made her life beautiful.

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The next ten days flew by on wings—wings of grief and dread foreboding for those in Theron's house. Work on the galley proceeded vigorously. Down from the hills, far to the east of the city, a long, tapering cedar-tree was brought. Its branches were hewn off, its bark stripped away, and the bare trunk set up in the place of the old, broken mast. New sails were an easy matter of provision, for the Selinuntians were adepts at making them, and three days sufficed for the shaping and sewing of these. Oars took more time, for strong wood was hard to procure around Selinous, and only two or three men in the city had any idea of the manner of carving out these heavy and unshapely things. The mending of the torn bottom of the ship and the replacing of her crushed bulwarks and sides required many days of skilful carpentry; and when all this was done, the heavy-clinging barnacles were carefully scraped from their comfortable abiding-place, and the good ship set right side up once more. Finally, on the last day of April, Eshmun declared her ready for the new launching, and sent word to all his crew that in forty-eight hours more their journey would be recommenced, and that on the evening before their start prayers and a sacrifice for a safe journey would be made at an altar erected on the sands.

Charmides had worked well and steadily at the remantling of the ship; and in this way became acquainted with her captain and all the crew, who, when they learned that he was to sail with them for Tyre, took some pains to show him courtesy. During this fortnight of labor Charmides' thoughts were busier than his hands, and they moved not wholly through regretful ways. It would have been wonderful had his young imagination not been excited by the prospect before him, that of strange lands and peoples, of pleasures and dangers with which he was to become acquainted. His fancy strayed often through pleasant paths, so that sometimes half a day went by before a remembrance of the coming separation from his home and from his mother brought a shadow across his new road.

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The prospect of departure was, too, far easier for Charmides to contemplate than it would have been for Phalaris, with all the athlete's affected stoicism. Up to this time Charmides had led a lonely life; no tastes that rendered him companionable towards others, or, rather, holding within himself resources that enabled him to lead a life in which the presence of others was unnecessary and undesirable. The existence that his imagination conjured up from the lands of the unreal had become dearer to him than that of actualities. He had created a world for himself, and peopled it with creatures of his fancy. With these he walked and held converse, and no one but Heraia, his mother, could have understood how completely they satisfied his every need of companionship. Thus he was able to take away with him almost all of his former life; and Charmides and Heraia both realized, in their secret hearts, that the way of another in his place would have been far harder than it promised to be for him.

During the last week before the sailing of the ship, Charmides held one or two long and serious talks with his father and brother. Theron, with grave, undemonstrative affection, gave him good counsel and excellent advice as to his dealings with men, and his behavior in various possible situations with them. Theron was not a poor man, neither was he an ungenerous one; and the bag of silver coins given the shepherd to carry away with him contained enough to transport him to the gates of the great city itself. Regarding the object of that journey, the father, after the first morning, said not one word. He felt that Charmides knew best what he intended to do; and it must be confessed that, despite his piety and his reverence for the gods of his race, the Selinuntian felt his credulity much taxed when it came to Istar, the living goddess of Babylon, of whose existence Kabir was their single witness, and at that a witness only at second hand, according to the Tyrian's own admission. Phalaris shared his father's views on this point; but, to his credit be it said, not the least suggestion of this feeling ever escaped him in his brother's presence after Charmides' decision to go had been finally and irrevocably made.

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Kabir, in the mean time, found his admiration of the shepherd increasing. Charmides now held many a talk with him on practical things, and the Phœnician found his prospective companion by no means lacking in common-sense. The young Greek very soon read enough of the other's nature to realize that poetry and imagination held small places in his category of desirable

characteristics; and the young man ceased to lay before the older one any pretty notions regarding sea-myths in which he was indulging himself when contemplating the long, eastward voyage. Now and then they spoke of Istar, and Tyre, and Babylon, which Kabir knew well by hearsay. But legends of mischievous Tritons and dangerous Sirens, of fair Nymphs and hideous sea-monsters, and stories of Delos and Naxos, of Crete and Halicarnassus, the rhapsode kept for himself and his lyre.

At length came the dawning of the last day of the shepherd's old life. The galley was launched and ready to sail. Food and water were stowed away on board; and the libations and sacrifices had taken place on the beach the evening before. Now, on this last afternoon, Charmides sat alone, a little way in front of the house, looking off upon the seas to which, to-morrow, he was to trust himself for safe convoy to such distant lands. It was a fair afternoon, and very warm. The rhapsode, basking in the sunlight, felt his emotions dulled under the beauty around him. His blue eyes wandered slowly over the familiar and yet ever-changing scene. His mind was almost at rest. Indeed, his eyelids had begun to droop with suspicious heaviness, when a gentle hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he turned to find his mother at his side.

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"Charmides!" she said, in a strained voice. And then again: "My Charmides!"

"My mother!" And she was held close in his arms, her tears raining down upon his face, his head drawn close upon her breast.

"Charmides! My boy, my beloved, my companion! How can I give thee up?"

The shepherd stood still and silent while her hands caressed his shining hair and her breath came and went in a vain effort to re-establish her self-control. After two or three minutes, in which his thoughts spun dizzily, he took both her hands in his own and lifted them to his lips.

"Mother," he said, rather brokenly, "Apollo will forgive, will release me from the vow. I will not go away. I will not leave thee here—alone." He kissed the hand again. "Come with me to the temple of the god, and I will absolve myself from the vow."

Heraia drew the boy still closer, and put her lips to the hair that clustered about his ear. "The gods bless thee, my dear one. Apollo will hardly forgive my weakness. Nay, Charmides, I did not come here to grieve over you, but to talk with you on many things that a mother has in her heart to say to her children. Let us sit here together and look off upon the sea—the sea that I must hereafter watch alone."

Thus speaking, she drew him down upon the ground beside her, into one of the daisy drifts, and they sat in silence for a little, looking off together over the far expanse of shimmering blue, with the turquoise horizon-line melting into the still bluer tint of the sky above. And when Heraia began again to talk, her tone was so low and so even that the words seemed to her listener to mingle with the afternoon, becoming at length so entirely a part of their surroundings that in his memory of the scene, as his mind held it in later years, her voice was forever accompanied by the shining of bright waters and the faint fragrance of the carpet of flowers surrounding her.

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"Your father, my Charmides, has talked with you of your long and lonely journey, of men, the ways of men, and your dealings with them. Obey his wishes in all these things, for his advice is that of one who has lived long and wisely in the world. But I, dear son, must speak to you in another way, of things which, were you not as you are, I should not mention before you. But you are young, and you are very pure; and your nature, with its hidden joys and hidden woe, I understand through my own.

"Your face and form, my Charmides, are beautiful—more beautiful and more strange than those of any man I have ever seen." She paused for a moment to look wistfully into that face, with its golden frame of hair, while the boy, astonished and displeased, muttered, resentfully:

"My face is that of a woman!"

His mother smiled at his disgust. "Nay, child, thy face has the man in it most plainly written. There is in it what women love—and it is of this that I would speak.

"Excepting myself, Charmides, you have known no woman well; and the feeling of a man for his mother is never his feeling for any other of her sex. Woman's nature is as yet, I think, closed to your understanding. In this long journey upon which you are faring forth, I do not doubt that you will encounter women, more than one, who will seek you for the beauty of your face. For women love beauty in men, as men desire it in them.

"In your connection with women, whether the acquaintance be of their seeking or of yours, remember this one thing, that I most firmly believe: All women, all in the world, of any land, I think, have in them two natures—one that is evil, and one that is good. It will rest with you alone which one you choose to look upon. For there is no woman so degraded, so lost to virtue, that she cannot remember a time of purity which you can reawaken in her. And there is no woman so good that, for the man she truly loves with her heart and with her soul, she will not fall; for so men have taught them, through the ages, to love. Therefore, my son, may the greatest of all humiliations come upon you if, knowing what I say to be true, you treat any woman with other than reverence and honor. For a woman who clings in dishonor to the man she loves is not to be blamed by the gods so much as the man she has trusted. For a man is strong and should have control over all his senses; but to a woman love is life; and it is decreed that life is all in all to us.

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"Yours, Charmides, is a white soul, a soul as beautiful as the body that holds it. As yet it is unspotted by a single act of wrong-doing. That you keep that soul pure throughout your life is my one prayer for you. I give you up to the wide world—to poverty, to wretchedness, to suffering perhaps—but in this I trust you to keep faith with me. Remember that I hold your honor as my own. Though Apollo may not vouchsafe that I see you again after to-morrow—ever; though the memory of me shall grow dim in your after-life; yet remember—strive to remember always—my last words, spoken out of my great, my aching love for you. For in these words my motherhood reaches its end. Your manhood has begun."

She kept her voice steady, her tears from falling, till the end. Not so the boy. When the last word had left her lips and she had bowed her head under her weight of sorrow, Charmides could not speak for the straining of his throat; and his eyes, brimming with salt tears, looked blindly upon the flushing clouds. For many minutes they were silent, sitting together for the last time, while the sunset hour drew on and the golden shadows fell athwart the daisies, and Heraia's words sank deeper into the shepherd's heart. Finally they rose, and moved, hand in hand, in the deepening twilight, back through the field to Theron's house. There Charmides passed once more through the door-way of his youth.

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The evening was long and very sad. After the forlorn supper the little group sat close together, saying little, yet loath to make a proposal of bed, for it had come home poignantly to all of them how very empty life would seem with Charmides taken away. After a time Kabir thoughtfully left them and went out to walk alone in the starlight. Then the two slaves, Doris and Sardeis, crept in and seated themselves in a distant corner of the living-room. Doris' wide eyes were tinged with red, and her mien was as dejected as Heraia's; for Charmides had been her comrade always. He had helped her in her tasks, had sung his shepherd songs to her from the fields, had not seldom procured pardon for her for some neglect of duty. And Sardeis, the skilful but rather churlish slave, who hated Phalaris and all his ways, and treated Theron with respect only because it meant a whipping if he failed to do so, had never once objected in his own heart to taking Charmides' flock from him as often as the youth desired lazy freedom, or to performing numberless little kindnesses for him that no beating could have drawn forth for the athlete. He, too, on this eve of the boy's departure, was beyond speech.

After nearly an hour of cheerless silence, Phalaris, with a desperate effort to relieve the general strain, brought out his brother's lyre and put it into Charmides' hands. There was a little repressed sob from Heraia, but the rhapsode's face brightened. For a few seconds he lovingly fingered the instrument. Then, lifting up his voice, he sang a song to the sea, a quaintly rhymed little melody, in his invariable minor. Finishing it, he began again, improvising as he went, with an ease and carelessness that produced wonderfully happy combinations. Now, as always, he found consolation for every grief in his incomparable talent. And when, after a last merry little tune that rose continually from its first tones till it ran out of his range at the end, he finally put the instrument away, Heraia and the slave alike had ceased to weep, Phalaris was smiling, and Theron rose cheerfully:

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"Now, Charmides, you must rise at dawn; therefore I bid you go to rest. Be up with the earliest light, and I will go with you to the temple, where, before Archemides, you will renew your vow and offer sacrifice of the youngest lamb in our fold. Kabir will join us there after the service is ended, and with him you will go down to the ship. Good-night. The gods grant you sleep."

Before Charmides had left the room Kabir came in again, and presently went off to his couch with the brothers.

Charmides' rest was broken, filled with dreams of far countries and with uncertain visions of her whom he was to seek. Disconnected sounds of music, bells, and phrases of charmed melody rang through his unconsciousness. Only in the last hour before dawn did he sink into untroubled slumber, from which, with the first glimmer of day, he rose. His mind was at rest, his heart filled with peace in the inward knowledge that what he was going forth alone to seek was no chimera, but a marvellous reality. It was, then, with a great, confident joy written upon his face that, at the rising of the sun, he stood before the altar of Apollo, and, in the presence of Archemides, the high-priest, surrounded by his father, brother, and the elders of Selinous, renewed his solemn vow and offered prayer and sacrifice to the Olympian of the Silver Bow.

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The hour following the ceremony was painful enough. As the boy looked back upon it afterwards, it was only a haze of tears, filled with his mother's incoherent words, his father's irrelevant advice, Phalaris' poor attempts at laughing at the rest: all of these things finally ending in a choked prayer and kiss from Heraia. Her last embrace, given as they stood upon the shore beside the little boat that was to row him out to the galley, sent a sharp pang through his heart. He knew that his father gently loosened her arms from his neck. He had a decided memory of the last mighty grip of Phalaris' fingers. Then he and the Phœnician, each with his bundle of clothes and money, stepped into the boat and were pulled over the smooth waters to the side of the *Fish of Tyre*, resplendent in her new rigging and furnishing.

They were the last to go on board. Eshmun awaited them anxiously, wishing to get away at once, into the fresh easterly breeze that was bellying out the ready-hoisted sail. Thus the pain of lingering in sight of the city, his home, was not protracted for the rhapsode. Ten minutes after he had stepped upon the deck of the ship her anchor was weighed, the tiller was pushed hard down, the sails sprang full, and the shore and rocky heights of the Greek city began slowly to recede from view.

Now came, for Charmides, twelve days of pure delight. He was alive and he was living upon the sea, that moving plain, every aspect of which was one of new beauty. From dawn to dusk, and back again in dreams to dawn, he fed his mind upon the all-abiding peace, the stillness made more still by the music of the ripples. Perfect freedom was his. He was as in the very centre of the world, the sea around him unbroken, as far as eye could reach, or perhaps some low-hanging, faintly olive-green cloud that others called an island, just touching the distant horizon-line, west or south. It was here and now, only, that the image of Istar, as he conceived her, took absolute possession of his soul. By day he walked with her, by night she watched over his light sleep. He talked to her, believing that she answered him. He sang to her and dreamed of her and prayed to her as something especially his own. Yet, near as was this image of his mind, Charmides never looked straight upon her face unveiled. Dimly, many times, he conjured up her features. Her eyes shone upon him out of the spangled night, but their color he did not know. Her cheek, smooth, warm, semi-transparent, tinted as the petal of the asphodel, was near his lips, but never desecrated by them. And while she thus moved near him, drawing him onward with intenser desire towards her far abiding-place, she was forever the goddess, in that she kept him always from all desire of a more human approach than this mystic, half-mental companionship.

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During the voyage the sailors regarded Charmides with a curiosity tinged with dislike. Eshmun himself was at a loss to comprehend the unsociable and idle existence of the youth, who lay all day long on the high stern, under the awning, singing to his lyre and watching the sea. And Kabir passed a good deal of time studying this intense phase of the shepherd's malady, and seeking to think out its cure. Considering the trader's eminent practicality, he conceived, with remarkable penetration, the workings of a poetically unbalanced mind. Only he, out of all the ship's company, cared to listen to the rhapsode's music. Only he lay awake by night to listen to and piece together the strange words that Charmides spoke in his sleep. But even he, it must be confessed, did not respect the effeminate romance that could lead a grown man into such ecstasies over a divine ideal.

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The *Fish of Tyre* took her course down the high coast of southern Sicily, halting once at Akragas and again at the easternmost point, Syracuse, where more water was taken on, and purchase made of a number of jars of a rosier, sweeter liquid. Then away to sea they sailed again, southward, round the heel of Italy, and north once more to the shores of Mother Greece herself, stopping finally at many-storied Crete, where the long sand-stretches on the coast yielded every year to the Phœnicians a store of their wonderful little dye-mollusks. Leaving the city of tyrant kings, the galley entered upon the waters that formed a setting for those jewels of the Mediterranean, the Grecian Isles, that rose like so many emeralds upon their amethystine waters, shot with gold by day, lying dim and murmurous by night under the dome of lapis-lazuli pricked with diamond stars. The galley, homeward bound, carrying her burden of homesick men, made no halt between Crete and Cyprus, which last was, to Tyrians, a second home. Charmides witnessed, with a little tug at his heart-strings, the great joy of his comrades, even Kabir and Eshmun, at once more beholding the familiar shores. A night was spent in the Karchenian harbor, for it was but one day's journey now to Tyre herself.

During that last night, while they were at anchor, Charmides, in his accustomed place on the deck, lay wide awake. The moon, half-grown, set about midnight over the land. The night was still and sweet, and the air warm with approaching summer. The planets shone like little moons, more radiant than Charmides had ever known them before. Now and then, from the town on shore, came the baying of a dog. The Greek's heart swelled with a painful longing that he could not define. It was the first twinge of homesickness, the first realization of the greatness of the world around him, and his own insignificance within it. Istar, the goddess, might indeed be near him; but the shepherd longed less for divinity than for the clasp of a warm human hand upon his own.

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It was better when the dawn, red-robed, came up out of the east. There was a bustle of sailors on deck, a creaking of ropes, and a flapping of sail-cloth. Then came the hoarse shouts of Sydyk, rousing the slaves from their chained slumber, bidding them bend cheerily to their oars, for the end of their eight months of agony and toil was near its end. The little ship sped out of the friendly harbor, gallantly distancing the waves, sending forth two hissing curls of foam off her prow, her rudder cutting a deep, pale line in the smooth wake. As the morning star died on the crimson of the east, the breeze freshened. The whole long horizon was shot with rosy clouds and topped by a line of gold that paled into delicate green as it melted towards the fair blue of the upper sky, in which the white stars had now long since hidden themselves away.

Charmides let his lyre rest as he stood by one of the bulwarks watching a bird float away from the ship, back towards the receding Cyprenian shore. Presently Kabir came to join him, and the two sat down together, cross-legged, on the deck. In one hand the Phœnician had brought a platter of cooked fish and some bread, while in the other he had a small jar of sweet wine.

"Food, my poet; food for the morning. Pray Apollo to make it sweet."

"You should be returning thanks to Melkart and Baal for the approaching end of the voyage," returned the Greek, speaking Phœnician in rather a subdued voice.

Kabir smiled to himself, but made no answer other than to hold out food to Charmides, who helped himself not too bountifully. The rhapsode, indeed, was in danger of falling into a melancholy reverie at this the very beginning of the day. But, after ten minutes' silence, his self-appointed friend fortunately broke in upon him.

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"Aphrodite's rites you practise, Charmides. Istar of the Babylonians you have come to seek. But

our Nature goddess, our divinity of fertility and beauty, you know nothing of. In Tyre, before you move farther to the east, you must let me show you how we are accustomed to worship Ashtoreth. Across the bay, on the mainland opposite the great Sidonian harbor, she has a vast sanctuary. We shall go there together, you and I, and you shall learn—" Kabir stopped speaking, and regarded the boy contemplatively.

"Learn—what?" asked Charmides, turning towards him slightly.

"Many things, Charmides, that it will be well for you to know. Will you drink of this? And there is new bread, also."

But the Greek refused more food, and was not sufficiently interested in the conversation begun to question Kabir further on the things that he should learn. The sun was rising now—a great, fiery wheel, burnished and dripping, sending its rays of dazzling drops high up the curved way, while it came on more slowly, more surely, till it rolled clear of the horizon, in a cloud of glorious, blinding flame.

Charmides prayed silently till the day was well begun, and sea and sky were resolved into their ordinary hues of blue and white and gold. Then, Kabir having gone again, the rhapsode, spent with his wakeful night, and sorrowful at heart with longing for his distant home, lay down upon the planks and slept. It was near noon when he woke again; and over all the ship one could feel the vibrations of excitement at thought of the nearness of Tyre, the home city. It should show along the horizon by sunset, and for that hour every soul on board was eagerly, impatiently waiting.

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To Charmides, standing forlornly near the prow, it appeared, at last, in a dream-like mist of scarlet and gold. Rushing water and green eddies and that marvellous, blinding haze mingled together and melted away to make room for the long-dreamed-of cloud picture that rose, like a conjured vision, out of the east. It was a mirrored city of white walls and drooping cypress-trees that stood far out in front of the gradually heightening coast-line behind them. It was Tyre, the city of the rising sun, viewed thus for the first time at the day's end. It was the gate of the new world. Charmides had stood long before its closed door, waiting, watching for admittance. Now, at last, the key was in his hand.

"It is fair, my home," observed Kabir, coming to stand at his shoulder, his tone fraught with suppressed joy and pride.

Charmides assented quietly. "Oh yes, Kabir. It is, indeed, fair. Very—fair."

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Not until an hour after sunset did Charmides at last set foot on shore and stand, in the dim evening crimson, on the western strand of the island city. His bundle of clothing and money was on his back. His lyre hung from his waist by a thong; and on his head, over its usual fillet, he wore a peaked cap of crimson cloth, cut after the Tyrian fashion. He was waiting for Kabir, who lingered to indulge in a round of chaff with half a dozen loquacious fellows on a small barge that was just about to put off for the galley. Kabir had, in the friendliest way, invited the shepherd to share his own lodging at the house of his brother in the city; but, notwithstanding this, the rhapsode felt forlorn enough as he stood looking out across the darkening waters in the direction of his home. It was a sudden and most untoward emotion that made the Greek blind to his appearance when Kabir finally came to his side. For not till the Phœnician's hand fell upon his shoulder, and the rather raucous voice sounded close in his ear, did Charmides turn, with a start, to follow his guide out into the streets of Tyre.

They were narrow, these streets, and twisting, and very dirty. Moreover, though the business of the day was finished, the thoroughfares were still a wriggling mass of litters, chariots, camels, asses, dogs, and men. Charmides slipped through patches of filth, and stumbled over animals that lay in his path, while he looked about him in dull displeasure at the buildings of stone and clay-brick and dried mud, sumptuous or wretched beyond belief, that lined these lanes. On all sides rose the clamor of rude, Phœnician voices and the mouthing of ungraceful words. Here and there a fire of sticks, burning in some court-yard and visible through an open door-way, cast an uncertain light across their path. Kabir walked rapidly, and in silence. His momentary feeling of excitement at being again in his native city had passed, and he had regained his usual placid indifference—the indifference that Charmides before now had found unexpectedly sympathetic.

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After nearly half an hour's walk the Phœnician halted before a very fair-sized wooden house, and, knocking ponderously upon the closed, brass-bound door, turned to Charmides with a slight smile, saying:

"It is the house of my brother, where I, also, make my home when I am here. You will be welcome in my family."

Charmides had no time to make a fitting reply, for the door was quickly opened by some one who, after peering for a moment or two into the darkness at the waiting figures, gave a sudden, loud

shout of delight and seized Kabir by the girdle. For the next ten minutes the young Greek stood in the background, watching the general mêlée that ensued upon the shout. Four children, besides the half-grown boy who had opened the door, made a speedy appearance; and they were followed by a quiet-looking woman who manifested extreme pleasure at sight of Kabir. Finally, out of the gloom of the interior, drawn by the hubbub of excitement at the door, appeared a dignified and well-dressed man, who, on perceiving Kabir, gave a quick exclamation, and, brushing away the clinging children, embraced his brother with every sign of delighted affection.

Half an hour later the whole party were seated in a well-furnished room, Charmides and Kabir partaking of supper, while the Phœnicians sat close about them, listening eagerly to the story of the long voyage, the disaster on the rocks of Selinous, and the account of Charmides and his family.

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"So you fare on to Babylon, stranger?" observed Abdosir, Kabir's brother. "It is well that you reached Tyre no later. The last caravan of the summer leaves for the East in three days, under charge"—he turned to his brother—"under charge of Hodo, whom you, Kabir, will surely remember. A month ago he came up from the great city, has now finished his business, and returns homeward by way of Damascus. The Greek will do well in his care."

"Yes, that is excellent.—Hodo! One could have asked no better master of the caravan." Kabir turned to Charmides with a smile; but the youth sat silent, his eyes still fixed on the face of Abdosir, his expression containing little enough of joy.

"You have heard what my brother says," continued Kabir, in Greek. "This Hodo is a Babylonian, and well known to us. He is a shrewd merchant and an excellent comrade. We will recommend you to him to-morrow. If your caravan starts in three days' time you will reach the city of Istar easily enough in another month."

Charmides tried hard to answer this speech in a proper spirit, but he found it an effort to speak at all. At the present moment the only wish of his heart was that any communication with distant Babylon might be found impossible, and that he himself might be at liberty to turn his face once more to the west. Perhaps this mood was partly induced by weariness. If so, Kabir knew his companion better than the Greek knew himself; for, after finishing their meat and wine, and talking for a few minutes with his nephews and nieces, Kabir quietly suggested to his sister-in-law that the Greek be shown a sleeping-apartment to which he might retire when he would, which proved to be immediately.

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The room in which Charmides finally fell asleep was one that boasted of greater luxury than he had ever known before. Walled with painted tiles, hung with embroideries, carpeted with rugs from far Eastern looms, and lighted by a hanging-lamp of wrought bronze, it presented to the Greek an appearance of comfort that drew from him a long sigh of content; and he sank to sleep on the soft couch with the name of Zeus on his lips and the image of his mother in his heart.

He awoke alone. Kabir's bed, across the room, had been slept on, but was empty now. The daylight about him was dim enough, but the half-light gave no hint of the hour; for the single window in the room was scarcely so large as a man's hand. Sounds of life were to be heard in the city outside, and from the house around him. Once really awake, then, and conscious of his whereabouts, Charmides rose in haste, dressed, smoothed his hair, looked for water but found none, and proceeded with some hesitation into the living-room. This he found to be occupied only by one of the children, a little girl, who greeted him shyly, and bade him eat of the food that had been left for him upon the table. Charmides, as timid as the child, forbore to ask for the water without which he felt it impious to begin the day, and sat down, as he was bid, to a repast of millet bread, buffalo milk, and lentils. These things he finished, to the satisfaction of the little Phœnician, and then looked about him wondering what to do. It was evidently late. By a question or two he learned that Kabir and Abdosir had been gone from the house for an hour or more, that Zarada was out on a visit, and that, in all probability, it would be noon before any one returned to the house. With this knowledge Charmides sought his mantle and cap, and went forth into the city to learn something of Tyre for himself.

Tyre by daylight was no less unlovely but rather more interesting than Tyre at night. Charmides, accustomed to the well-ordered dignity of life in his distant Doric city, was amazed and bewildered here, in the midst of this labyrinth of narrow streets choked with men and animals. Having some idea of direction, he felt no dread of losing his way, but wandered on at will, hurried and pushed from one side of a street to the other, always too diverted by what he saw to resent the interferences. He chanced presently on a broader thoroughfare, one fairly well kept, stretching in a straight line from north to south. This, as he guessed, was the principal street of the city, terminating, as he could not know, on the north, in the great agenorium, or open mart, east of the Sidonian harbor, and, on the south, in the grove and temple of Melkart. Charmides moved along up this street, admiring the solid stone buildings that lined it on either side; watching the graceful chariots drawn by richly caparisoned horses, and driven by men who, from their dress, were evidently rulers in the oligarchy; and constantly annoyed by the importunities of beggars or venders of cheap wares that were to be found everywhere through the city, but most of all on this street. He had walked farther than he knew, for at length he came in sight of the sea that stretched out before him from the other side of a great, open square running down to the water's edge.

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Open square it had been, no doubt, at the time of its planning; but, in all probability, since the day of completion, no one had ever seen it empty. Just now, certainly, there was not a spare foot

of pavement in its entire area, and Charmides looked about him with the wonderment and pleasure of a child. Directly before him were the shoe and sandal venders, who occupied about a quarter of an acre of space. Shoes were an article that Charmides had never seen worn. Their purpose was easy to divine, however, and he fell to admiring the cleverness of their invention and the beauty of their ornamentation. Beyond this interesting spot came the silk and cloth merchants, then the leather venders, brass and metal workers, and dealers in Egyptian and Sidonian jewelry. To the left of these was the market, where grain, fish, fruits, meat, and wines were to be had; while down the whole eastern edge of the space lay a row of dirty, supercilious-looking camels, half of them for sale, half of them owned by sellers in the mart.

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Charmides had not yet begun to thread a path through the tangle of men and merchandise when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to find Kabir at his side.

"So you are here, my Charmides! Have you come to seek us out? Who directed you hither?"

"I came by chance to this place, not knowing you were here. It is wonderful! I have not seen anything like it before."

"No. Selinous certainly has no such place. Here, indeed, we are well met. Desert needs of yours may be supplied before we leave the market. Now, Charmides, you must be made known to him who will lead you farther into the East. Hodo the Babylonian is with me. Hodo! Here!"

Kabir looked round and beckoned to a little fellow who had left him to examine the goods of a cloth merchant near by. At Kabir's call, however, he turned, and, seeing Charmides, came over to his friend's side. Charmides beheld a small man, hardly five feet high, swathed from head to heels in white garments of rich texture. Well as they were worn, however, they could not conceal the semi-deformity of the little fellow. He was altogether crooked: crooked in his legs, in his back, in his nose, in his expression—an ugly little man with an ugly little face that had in it a singularly infectious gleam of humor.

Hodo looked at Charmides, and his ugliness gathered and broke into a delighted smile that transformed every feature of his face. Charmides looked at Hodo and could not refrain from answering the smile with a gay laugh. Thenceforward Hodo felt that he had Charmides for a friend.

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"Now, Theronides, Hodo will go with us into the mart here and will tell us what you need for the desert journey, that we may buy."

"But what things should I need? I have all necessary garments, as many as I can carry with me, now."

"What to wear on the head for dust?" demanded Hodo, speaking Phœnician in a deep and rather rich voice.

"This cap—and my fillet. In the heat I shall not need even those."

"Hump!" Hodo grinned, crookedly. "I have crossed the desert nineteen times, young Greek, and I will tell you what you must wear. See—you are a yellow man, and your skin is as thin as a Phrygian's, while mine is like leather. Your hair is too fine to shield you at all from the fierce rays of Shamash. There must be a square of silk to wind about your head, and two thicknesses of muslin to protect your neck in the back. Then, if you think me versed in desert knowledge, you will leave off that short tunic and get a single linen garment that will cover you down to your heels. You will want a light cloak, perhaps, for night, for comfort; but you will not often wear it. The rains are over. Summer is upon us. None will suffer from cold upon the desert."

Charmides listened closely to this speech, yet was not able to understand all that the Babylonian said, for he spoke Phœnician as thickly as a Phœnician spoke Greek. The rhapsode, therefore, turned appealingly to Kabir, who explained the words at length; and then, Charmides having very sensibly put himself into Hodo's hands, the three proceeded to make the necessary purchases, for which Kabir paid, while Charmides repaid him from his bag at Kabir's abode. On their return walk Charmides questioned Hodo as to when and whence their caravan was to start, and he found that it would be but two days before men and camels assembled on the mainland, in a little square opposite the Egyptian harbor.

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"And we do not go straight to Babylon?"

"As straight as will be well in this season. Damascus first, then out and over the desert. It is the easiest route—twenty days' ride from the gate of Six Thieves."

"And you come now from Babylon?"

"Two months ago I was there, Greek. Kabir knoweth it."

Charmides nodded apologetically and said no more. Kabir watched for the light to come into his eyes, and waited for a certain question. But the youth kept silent, and, after a pause, the Babylonian took the words out of Kabir's mouth and rushed in upon the young man's thoughts.

"It is said, Greek, that you take this long journey for the sake of our goddess, the lady Istar, queen of the gods of Babylon."

Kabir kept his eyes fixed on those of Charmides, but failed to see any interest come into the youth's expression. Instead, a frown spread itself over the fair forehead, and the young mouth

straightened ominously.

"The object of my journey matters little," was his low-voiced reply.

Hodo's eyes stretched open. He sent a grimace of astonishment to Kabir, and silence followed Charmides' last words. The three walked on uncomfortably, till there came sounds of a surprising chuckle from the Babylonian, who, as both his companions turned towards him, exclaimed, irrepressibly:

"The thought of Ishtar brings me to another. Kabir—to-morrow, I remember, is the day of the semi-yearly rites of Ashtoreth—at her sanctuary on the mainland."

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For a second or two Kabir did not reply. He was musing—on a subject relative to Charmides' girlish purity. Finally he said: "Yes. The yearly festival of Tammuz took place a month ago. To-morrow is the festival of the virgin rites. We will go—all three. You, Charmides, shall see the ceremonies of our Aphrodite, Astarte of the Mazzarines. She is our Tyrian Istar."

Charmides looked at him with new animation. "Do they offer sacrifice?"

"Yes—in the grove—doves and lambs, and one young bullock. But the real ceremony takes place within the temple. Knowing but little of our Eastern customs, you will do well to see that."

Charmides nodded acquiescence, and Hodo chuckled to himself again. But the silence that followed lasted till they had once more reached the house of Abdosir.

During the remainder of that day Charmides made no remark on the subject of the amusement promised for the morrow. Kabir tried to draw him to it by talking of the great temples of Melkart, Baal, and the Olympian Zeus that were on the island. But Charmides seemed to be developing a surprising and unnecessary taciturnity, for which the Phœnician, regarding him as extraordinarily young, would hardly have given him credit; and, before the evening was over, Kabir was moved to consider, a little more closely, how much depth of character really lay behind that open and ingenuous personality.

As a matter of fact, Charmides' silence was the result of a chance remembrance of his last talk with his mother, mingled with a prophetic intuition of what the morrow would bring forth. When the morrow arrived, however, and Hodo, gay in red embroideries, came with it, Charmides appeared in his holiday garments, and seemed as ready as his companions to set forth to the holy place.

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The grove and temple of Ashtoreth, or Astarte, of Tyre, were outside the city proper, and lay on the mainland, south of the Egyptian harbor. From the spot where ferry-boats left one after the passage of the narrow channel, there was a walk of nearly a mile southward to the entrance of the grove. This was marked by open gates and two ill-carved stone statues, the subjects of which Charmides regarded with haughty displeasure. His first impression, however, was ameliorated by the great beauty of the wood, where cedar and cypress trees grew at will, while the shaded ground was kept clear of leaves and brush, and was covered with a rare velvet turf. The coolness and shade to be found beneath the great branches, after the pitiless sunshine through which they had been walking, was delicious; and the Greek would willingly have given the afternoon to wandering here, watching the golden shadows and exploring the sinuous paths that wound everywhere before him. He did not, however, venture to suggest this course. There was now a stream of men passing and following them to the temple. Hodo was half running in his eagerness, and Kabir himself had perceptibly quickened his pace. Neither of them spoke, and the Greek was free to watch the people around him, to marvel at the richness of their garments, the profusion of their jewelry, and the extreme animation of their faces. He caught glimpses, also, of three stone altars, carved in indistinguishable bas-relief, covered with offerings, and attended by yellow-robed priestesses, with whom, indeed, the way to the temple was thronged. It was ten minutes' walk from the entrance of the grove before the temple itself was reached.

A broad, low, badly proportioned building of stone, colonnaded with pillars of Assyrian design and startlingly disagreeable to the Greek eye, frieze and pediment carved with gross caricatures of the Phœnician pantheon, and a sloping, square door-way of Egyptian style, was the sight that met Charmides' eyes—the far-famed sanctuary of Ashtoreth of Tyre. The crowd of men assembling at this door-way from every part of the grove made it necessary to wait one's turn before entering. Hodo, Kabir, and Charmides had difficulty in keeping together in the crush, but finally found themselves inside.

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Here was darkness, odorous with stale incense, dotted with glimmering lights, moving with men. Once within, Kabir and Hodo performed some prostrations and muttered a prayer or two, to the words of which Charmides listened rather blankly. Then the three of them passed from the entrance hall into the great room of the temple. This was lighted from the roof by hundreds of swinging lamps; and, Charmides' eyes having become accustomed to the softened light, he was able to see everything distinctly.

The entire company of spectators halted at the upper end of the room. Opposite them, in the farther wall, was the shrine of the goddess, in which her statue stood. About this shrine hung bronze lamps of beautiful workmanship, in which burned perfumed oil and frankincense. In front of the shrine, which was paved with African marble, was a slab of smooth granite, eight feet long, six broad, and about four in height. Around this knelt a company of priestesses, all but one of whom were robed in yellow. The one, whose bowed head could hardly be seen, was clad in a

single garment of white veiling; and her hair, unbound, fell in a brown curtain to the floor on either side of her. Charmides, taking his eyes from the group of worshippers, looked again around the room. About it, built into the walls behind the pillars, were half a hundred dim niches, shadowy, unlighted, of indeterminable depth, the purpose of which he failed to divine. Except for these, the pillars, the shrine, and the altar, there was nothing to look at in the room, for the walls were bare of inscriptions, and there were no other statues than the one of Ashtoreth in her sanctum.

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This survey finished, Charmides turned all his attentions to the group of priestesses at the end of the room. They were now chanting aloud; and, from the restlessness among the company of men, Charmides decided that the ceremony was approaching a point of interest. Presently Kabir seized his hand and the two of them followed in the wake of Hodo, who was eagerly forcing a passage into the front rank.

All those in the first row were, whether by chance or design Charmides could not know, young, more or less comely, and dressed with extreme elegance. As the rhapsode gained his new position he felt upon him the eyes of half the company; and not a few whispers relative to his fair skin and his fine physique reached his ears. His speculation as to the reason for this was presently forgotten, however, for the women down the room had formed into a semicircular phalanx, in the very centre of which stood the white-robed, unveiled girl. Then, to the sound of a processional chant, all of them began a slow advance up the hall towards the orderly ranks of men. The Greek caught a new order of whispers, now, that rose about him on all sides. Of these he understood here and there a phrase: "Beautiful this time!" "Her hair is her veil!" "Ashtoreth will that she choose me!" "Baal did well to let her come!" And then, as the chant ended and the women halted ten feet from the front row of men, every sound ceased. After a short pause the priestesses separated into two groups, and from their midst the white virgin came slowly forth. At her appearance every man dropped upon one knee, Kabir pulling the wide-eyed Greek down beside him. Again there was a pause, during which Charmides felt his heart beating uncomfortably. The maiden was regarding the ranks of men before her. Slowly, fearfully, her eyes moved along from face to face, their passage marked here and there by a sharply drawn breath from some one before her. Charmides, entirely ignorant of the meaning of this rite, watched her with tentative interest. She was young, her face as white as her robe, her big, half-terrified eyes of a dove-gray color. Pretty—very pretty—she was, as pretty as Doris—but not beautiful. Charmides had, of late, been picturing too divine a beauty to feel any tremor of eagerness before this gentle priestess of Ashtoreth.

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All at once her eyes flashed to his. He drew back, earnestly hoping that she would pass him by. But this was not to be. The gray orbs halted at the blue ones, moved languidly over his perfect face, descended to his shoulders—arms—body—and at last a faint tinge of red crept into her deathly cheeks. She nodded once to him, murmuring half a dozen indistinguishable words. Instantly Charmides felt two violent shoves, the one from Kabir on the right, the other from Hodo on the left.

"Rise! Rise to your feet!" Kabir whispered, peremptorily.

Charmides obeyed.

"Go forward to her. The hierodules will take you."

Charmides went towards the girl. Before he had reached her two of the other women advanced to his side and took him by the hands, at the same time recommencing their chant. Thereupon the whole company, women and men, began a slow march back towards the shrine. Charmides was still in the maze of his first surprise. He walked mechanically between his conductresses, his eyes fixed on the back of the sacrificial maiden who moved in front of him. At twenty paces from the altar the general company stopped. Only Charmides, the girl, and two priestesses advanced till they stood directly in front of the shrine with the altar behind them. Then a hush fell upon the multitude, and Charmides experienced a sudden tremor—a dread of what was to happen next. He had no idea whatever for what purpose he had been chosen, whether it threatened his life, endangered his freedom, or gave promise of honor. Kabir had been eager for him to go, however; and it was evident that many had desired his place. At any rate, the blood in his veins was Greek—and Doric Greek. This thought brought tranquillity, and he stood with renewed indifference till a move was made that struck him like a blow. At a certain phrase in the chant the two women stepped to either side of the white virgin, unclasped the two wrought pins that held her robe upon the shoulders, and, with a quick twist, let the garment fall to the floor.

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There was an impulsive quickening in the song. Slowly the girl faced Charmides, her head drooping, her hands clasped before her, her brown hair falling about her shoulders. Supported on either side, she moved towards him till her knee touched his tunic. Charmides took a hasty step backwards, not hearing the faint sigh that escaped her lips. Then one of the priestesses frowned.

"Take her up to Ashtoreth!" she said, pointing from the girl to the stone altar.

Now at last Charmides understood, and he turned white with wrath. For an instant he let his eyes rest in utter scorn, utter disgust, upon the three women in front of him. Then he hurled at them a Greek phrase, fortunately incomprehensible to the multitude. Lastly, unheeding the look of abject terror that was overspreading the face of the girl, he turned upon his heel and began to walk rapidly down the long hall to the door.

By this time the chant had given place to a rising chorus of astonishment and wrath on the part of

the men, and of woe on the side of the women. Still the Greek, absorbed in his own displeasure, kept on his way, and would presently have been outside the building, when Kabir, darting from the throng, seized him roughly by the shoulders.

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"Charmides! Thou fool! What do you?"

The rhapsode, frowning angrily, tried to shake off his companion, but Kabir's hands were strong.

"Know you, I say, what you do?"

Charmides turned upon him. "I will not dishonor her, neither myself!" he said, in a voice husky with repression.

"Dishonor—in the rites of Ashtoreth! Nay, you would kill her, rather, then?"

Charmides shrugged.

"You have refused her after the presentation. That is a sign that she is displeasing to the goddess. She will now be offered up upon the altar of death. Her blood must wash away the shame you put on her. Her heart will be cut out and thrown to the dogs to eat."

The young Greek shivered and stood passive. His eyes wandered aimlessly over the scene before him. Kabir dropped his hold, but Charmides made no move to go on. He seemed to be considering. The company was eying him in an anxious silence that had something of respect in it. But the eyes of the doomed girl burned upon his back in mute, despairing entreaty. Every murmur had died away, and a deadly hush settled over the great hall. The lights burned calmly from above, and the odor of fresh incense became overpowering. Still the shepherd did not move. One instant more and Aris, the high-priestess, would send the order for the sacrificial knife. The Greek's thoughts wavered vaguely between his mother and his own natural instincts of purity on the one hand; and, on the other, the exigencies of the Phœnician religion. The struggle was fierce. Heraia's memory was infinitely dear, and the Greek idea of manhood strong within him. Still, death—death was terrible to his mind; and the death of this young girl—

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His meditations were interrupted here. Something had suddenly clasped his feet, something lay twisted on the floor before him. A white body, half covered with the long locks of dishevelled hair that flowed from a lowered head, lay there on the stones. Two strained arms caught at his knees. A faint voice, choked with the tears of despair, was begging incoherently for the life that he could give. All of a sudden he melted. He bent his head, drawing a long breath of resignation. Then he stooped, lifted the girl in his arms, and carried her rapidly over to the altar of Ashtoreth. And the great bacchanal that followed upon his act the youth neither saw nor heard.

Kabir and Hodo were both of them abjectly respectful to Charmides next day. For all his defeat, the youth had been left their master, and he knew it. The name of Ashtoreth was not spoken before him in Abdosir's house; no mention ever after did either Phœnician or Babylonian make of the affair of yesterday; and in one day more Charmides had looked his last upon the city of the sea.

It was in a state of mental chaos that Charmides began his journey to Babylon. In the glare of midday the long row of well-watered camels, heavy laden with riches of the West, swayed to their feet, on the mainland of Tyre, and turned their heads in the direction of Damascus. Charmides had said good-bye to Kabir an hour before, and now sat his animal with an eager light in his eyes and a clutch of regret in his heart—desire for the new, love for the old. He tried hard that day to fix his mind on the great object of his journey, the goddess of Babylon, whom he was so soon to see. But all things around him were new, all things fair, and soon he gave up the attempt at abstraction to watch what went on around him. Far ahead, upon the foremost camel, was Hodo, the leader of the caravan, who, with his desert costume, had also donned an undeniable dignity of demeanor. Before and behind Charmides, in the very centre of the line, sat solemn Orientals whose nationality he did not know. Far to the right stretched flat, fertile fields of grain. To the left, at no great distance, the river Leontes flashed a tumultuous, sunlit course down to the sea. Eastward, in front, rose an uneven line of jutting hills, bathed in the luminous, tranquil light of intensely pure air. The day was hot, the motion of the camel so far rather soothing. Charmides' turbaned head drooped. His eyelids closed. Thoughts of Istar were mingled with memories of the white virgin. Presently, then, he fell asleep.

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Five days later the camels of a shortened caravan passed out of the Hittite city and turned their faces towards the southeast. It was early morning. Before them the sky was radiant with promise of the coming of the lord of day. Behind them, Damascus slept. Far to the right, a mere olive-colored shadow on the horizon, was the line of verdure that marked the course of the river Jordan, the eastern boundary of Phœnicia. Ahead, and on every side for endless miles, in infinite,

sparkling, yellow waves, stretched the desert, a vast, silent plain of death, dreaded by man and beast; a foe that Assyrian armies had found more terrible than all the strength of Egypt; that Babylon in her mighty decadence knew to be a safer guard against plundering hoards than all her towering walls; that the wandering Hittites, Damascenes born of the burning sand, themselves would not venture upon at this season of the growing year. And into this, light-hearted, went Charmides the Greek, for the final proof of his steadfastness, the final trial of his strength, for which the reward was to be a sight of the great goddess—Ish-tar—kâ—Bab-i-lû.

Now, indeed, at this early hour, when night's sweetness had not yet been dispelled, Charmides, bareheaded, sat smiling at the sunrise, at the novelty of the sand-plain, at the steady, awkward trot of his camel, at the solemnity of the turbaned Babylonians before and behind him, and at Hodo's crooked little figure at the head of the line. There were twenty camels, well packed with articles of Tyrian and Damascene manufacture, and a man to add to each load. On the back of every animal, where the sight of it would not continually tantalize the desert traveller, hung a water-skin, still dripping from contact with the well, but not to be replenished for five weary days. Before their departure, Hodo had explained to the Greek the best hours for, and the most satisfying methods of, drinking; for these things had been reduced to a minute system by traders, in seasons when wells might go dry and water was in any case scarce. In consequence of his instructions, and the determination to obey them rigidly, Charmides found himself from the very first in a state of thirst. In the freshness of the morning this was not difficult to bear; but by noon, when the whole sky blazed like molten gold and the desert was a plain of fire, the desire for drink increased till it became a torture before which he weakened and fell. He took more than a cupful of water from his skin before the tents were pitched for the mid-day rest, and he felt himself an object of censure for the entire caravan; though, in truth, there was no trader of them all but had done the same thing many times, before long training had hardened him to endurance.

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This caravan was the last to cross the desert that year; and the heat bore with it one compensation. The strong guard of soldiers, or fighting-men, that generally accompanied a caravan to guard it from plunder by the wild desert tribes, had been dispensed with. The forefathers of the modern Bedâwin were not hardier than their descendants, and they made no dwelling-place in the Syrian desert at this season. It was, indeed, dangerously late for the passage; and each succeeding day brought a fiercer sun and shorter hours of darkness. The rest at noon was long, but there was no halt at all by night. Oases wells were low, and there must be no lagging by the way. Hodo held daily council in his tent with the three eldest traders, to make sure of the best course to keep, and to save the few miles possible to save. At one of these conferences, some days out, the man that rode behind Charmides, Ralchaz by name, spoke to Hodo of the young Greek, suggesting that Charmides was bearing the journey hardly, and would need care if he were to cross the desert alive. Hodo, a little conscience-smitten with the knowledge of neglect, hastened off to the tent occupied by Charmides and two of the younger men. Here he found that it was, indeed, high time to attend to the rhapsode's condition.

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Charmides was lying, face down, on the rug that covered the sand in the tent. Motionless, his body rigid, his hands clasped in front of him, making no sound, breathing inaudibly, he lay; while at a little distance his two companions, Babylonians, squatted together over their meal of locust-beans, bread, and dates, now and then regarding the youth with a kind of wistful helplessness.

Hodo, scarcely looking at the other two, ran to Charmides' side, knelt by him, and, placing a hand on his shoulder, cried out:

"Charmides! Charmides! Speak! What demon of sickness has got you?"

He spoke in Chaldaic, using the idiom that a Greek would not understand. The entreaty, however, had its effect. Charmides made an effort, rolled upon his back, and looked up at the master of the caravan. Hodo gave a quick exclamation of dismay and cried out:

"Tirutû! Bring me some water!"

One of the men sprang to his feet. "Gladly! Yet he will not drink."

"Not drink! Allât help us! Why?"

"He has emptied his own skin and will not accept of water from ours."

Hodo nodded his understanding. "Go, then, to my tent, and bring one of the skins of extra water, together with a jar of the wine of Helbon—and see that you move like Râman!"

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Charmides understood not a word of this conversation, but he surmised its trend, and essayed to say something in Phœnician. Coherent speaking, however, had become impossible; for his tongue was swollen out of all shape, and his mouth was on fire with fever. Hodo laid a gentle hand upon his forehead, smoothed the hair back from it, noted the inflamed and pitiable condition of the wide, blue eyes, the brilliant fever-flush that burned upon the fair cheeks, and his face grew graver still.

"The journey will go hard with him," he muttered.

Tirutû presently returned with the damp pigskin on his shoulder, and a small, glazed stone flask in his right hand. Ustanni, the second of Charmides' fellow-tentsmen, was already at Hodo's side with a bronze cup. This they filled with a mixture of water and wine, and then Hodo, lifting the Greek's head upon his arm, held the drink to his lips. Charmides' nostrils quivered like an animal's. The tears started to his eyes, and there was a convulsive working of the saliva glands in

his mouth. For one agonized moment he resisted the temptation; and then, with the abandon of a creature half crazed, he drank at a gulp all that the cup contained, and begged guiltily, with his fevered eyes, for more. Hodo let him take all that he wanted. Then food—bread, dates, and cooked sesame—was fed him. Next his eyes, rendered almost useless by the desert glare, were rubbed with a balm brought from Hodo's tent, which reduced their fever and inflammation in a miraculous way. Two hours later, at the forming of the caravan, Charmides' camel was led out and fastened next to Hodo's at the head of the line; and when the Greek, walking more easily than for three days past, came to mount, he found a full water-skin strapped upon the animal's back, and two little jars of Hodo's rare wine balancing each other on either side of its neck. Venturing to remonstrate feebly at this lavish generosity, the rhapsode was silenced by a flood of angry eloquence from Hodo, who finished his tirade by saying:

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"Drink as often as yours is the desire, for I tell you this truly: Shamash is pitiless to those who pray not to Mermer; and, in drinking of his gift, you will do honor to the god of Rains. I will not leave you behind me in the desert, Charmides; and yet I cannot carry your dead body on to Babylon. Therefore you will do well to live. For I think that the Lady Istar will be displeased if, when you are so near, you desert her for the Queen of Death. So, Charmides, again I bid you drink; shut your eyes to the sun; eat and sleep as you can. See that you heed these words." And with a little chuckle at his own advice, Hodo mounted his beast, and, after the usual tumultuous rising, with many shouts and much wielding of his hide-whip, set the caravan once more in motion.

For forty-eight hours more Charmides, making a strong effort, stubbornly refusing to admit that he was still sick, made an appearance of recovery from his indisposition. He talked with Hodo, asking welcome questions about trade, life, and home. He spoke to those members of the caravan from whom hitherto he had held aloof. And he made a desperate effort to learn from the leader a few phrases in the Babylonish tongue. This last, however, proved a Herculean task. The Greek race was notoriously the least apt of any nation at learning foreign tongues. Phœnician had been difficult enough; but when it came to the harsh, thick accents, the many syllables, and the curious construction of this other language, the language of the people of Istar, Charmides found it an apparently hopeless task, from which, in his present condition, he shrank miserably.

The desert days crept on. The hours from red dawn to redder twilight were filled with fainting prayers for night and darkness. And when night came, and with it the golden moon, it seemed that the heat scarcely lessened; for up from the yellow sands rose a burning stream of day-gathered fire that made the very camels wince, and called forth many a smothered curse and groan from the long-seasoned men. Yet these nights were wonderful things. The high moon overshadowed all her lesser lights, so that the sky around was strung with few stars; but these glittered with dazzling radiance against their luminous background. And when the dread dawn approached, and the moon grew great on the western horizon, balanced by the long, palpitating lines of light in the east, the sight, to any but desert travellers, was a thing to pray to. Charmides, indeed, in spite of his condition, did marvel at the miracles of the sky. But his lyre was heavy in his hands, his voice too cracked for song, and he could but sit, drooping, on his camel, head throbbing, body on fire, drinking in the golden fire, and wondering vaguely if he should ever find the Babylon that he sought, or whether Apollo had destined him for a different and a higher place.

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Another besides the Greek had begun to speculate on the same subject. Hodo, with his Babylonish idea of the dreary after-life, watched his charge with an anxiety and a grief that betrayed a surprising affection for the youth. Though Charmides suffered no longer from thirst, though Hodo's own food was prepared for him, though the best camel in the caravan was at his disposal, he grew weaker and yet more weak, and his fever increased till the desert sands themselves were no hotter than his skin. On the eighteenth day of the journey Charmides was lifted from his animal at the noon halt, talking incoherently of Selinous, of Heraia, of Kabir, and Apollo. He showed no sign of recognizing Hodo and the pitying traders that clustered about the tent where he lay. Rather, he gave them strange names which they had never heard; he talked to them in his own language; and he tried continually to sing in his cracked, harsh voice. Hodo watched him doubtfully for a time; then his lips straightened out and his crooked face grew grim. He dismissed every one from his tent, and set himself to watch over the sick man alone. Gradually Charmides sank into a drowsy state, and, five hours later, when the camels were reloaded and placed in line for the long night march, he was still but half conscious. Hodo had him lifted upon his camel and strapped there, since he showed himself unable to sit upright. A moment or two later the cry for the march was given, and the little procession started forward at its usual trot. Next morning Charmides lay limply forward upon his animal's neck, in a state of irresistible coma; and Hodo mentally prepared to bury him there in the sand before another dawn. All day, indeed, the Greek hovered on the borderland of death; yet, since he had not passed it when the halt was ended, he went on again with the rest in the late afternoon.

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For twelve hours now the rhapsode had been unconscious. It was, perhaps, the sudden renewal of motion, after the mid-day rest, that roused him. At all events, the caravan was scarcely moving before his eyes lost their glazed stare, and he half closed them while he looked about him. It was a pleasant hour of the afternoon. Behind him the sun was nearing the horizon, and in the sky overhead floated two or three feathery shreds of cloud—a gladsome sight. With an effort, in which he discovered how very weak he had become, the rhapsode turned himself till he lay in such a position that he could watch the sunset. He had almost an hour to wait—a long, hot, drowsy hour, during which, however, he did not drop back into torpor. As the sun sank, a ridge of

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white, billowy clouds, such as are almost never to be seen in those skies in summer, rose to catch the falling globe. And when the fire reached them, Charmides quivered with delight to see the flood of color—scarlet and purple, and pale, pinkish gold—that ran over the white mass. A valley between two of these lofty hills received the central stream of blood-fire, and on this blinding spot the Greek fixed his eyes and gazed, till his brain reeled with the seething glory. When the sun had left the world and the other lights grew pale, this one place retained all its brightness. The watcher was too feeble even to wonder at the phenomenon; nor did he marvel when, out of this bank of fire, a figure began to resolve—a figure human in form and yet most splendidly divine. There was a face that glowed with the hues of the evening, framed in short, waving locks of auburn red, still fiery with the sunset, and crowned with a circlet of silver stars that burned radiantly through the coming dusk. Then Charmides perceived that all the clouds had formed into a flowing garment that enveloped the body of the apparition. When the glow was quite gone, and purple shadows had stolen softly through the whole sky, the mighty figure stood out clearly and more clear, till every fold in the royal vestment was distinct, till the two bright streaks that had stretched out on either side of the shoulders had become wings of silver, and the patch of gold low on the right was a lyre, ready-strung. The vision was complete. Charmides, now but half sensible, scarcely noting the cool breath of the descending night, watched and thirsted for what he knew must come.

He had not long to wait. As the first, faint star came out into the evening, the heavenly figure moved, floating in stately swiftness upon his outstretched wings towards the wormlike caravan that crawled across the sands. And as he moved he lifted the lyre, drawing his hand across its strings. Charmides gave a faint gasp. It was as if his body had been plunged into a running stream. Allaraine's music swept across his senses, now in the faintest, long-drawn vibration, that drew the soul to one's lips and let it hang there, seeking to follow the flight of the sound; now in broad chords that swept like the storm-wind over the plain; again, melting into melody that bore one to the shore of the sunlit sea. The Heavenly One played on while the shepherd, in helpless ecstasy, lay back, unnerved and numb, held to the camel only by the thongs with which Hodo had bound him there. It was a long time, though how long the rhapsode could not tell, before he was roused by a warm thrill, to find that the bard of the skies floated beside him, one of the effulgent wings spreading out over his body, the light from it bathing his whole figure in a stream of strength-giving fire. And even in his amazement Charmides wondered why he heard no sound from any member of the caravan. All was still around him. Star-spangled darkness was over them all. The moon had not yet risen. Hodo was nodding on his camel, and many of the traders were in their first sleep. Only he, only the Charmides whom they had thought dying, was awake to welcome the messenger of the gods that honored them by his coming. The Greek, lying under the shadow of the silver wing, felt that a prayer or some other fitting acknowledgment of the presence should be made. So he struggled to an upright position and raised his face to that of the god. Slowly the star-crowned head turned to him, and a pair of deeply glowing eyes, filled with benign pity, and great with suffering, looked upon the youth. Charmides' lids fell shut in sudden, ecstatic terror, and, while his head was bent, he felt upon his hair the touch of the god. Instantly he fell back. Then, once upon his left eye and once upon his right, came the imprint of the divine mouth. With the kisses blackness rolled over him. His spirit slept.

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Morning, clear, cloudless, infinitely stifling, swept over the desert. Hodo, who had drowsed through the night, lifted his head and looked about him, trying to define the sense of weight at his heart. He realized it presently, and, reluctant with fear, turned and looked behind him. Yes. The dread was justified. Charmides lay white and limp upon his camel. They must bury him that day under the yellow sand of this godless waste. Hodo's crooked little face screwed up spasmodically. Then he gave the long, quavering cry that meant, "Halt the caravan." With some little difficulty the camels were reined up, and all watched Hodo make the dismount and run to the side of the animal on which the Greek was bound. Then they understood; and a long, low, minor wail, the greeting to death, rose from every throat. It stopped with extreme suddenness when Hodo gave a sudden shout of amazement. Every trader saw Charmides suddenly sit up, and a few directly behind heard his voice, stronger than for a week past, cry to his friend a Phœnician greeting.

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"Charmides is not dead!" shouted the leader, in unmistakable delight. "It is a miracle! He is well again! The fever is gone!"

The rhapsode smiled, and spoke his thanks to Hodo for all the past care; but of how he had been made well he said not a word, for he knew that the miracle had been for him alone. At the noon halt the merchants one by one came up to him, pressing his hand to their breasts and giving every expression of friendly joy at his recovery. And fully recovered he was, indeed. During the succeeding days his fever did not return; nor did the long hours of the march tire him as hitherto. He returned now to the tent that he had at first occupied; and, as he ate and slept with his Babylonish comrades, he tried again, with more success, to acquire a few phrases in the new tongue. He found his companions willing and patient teachers. And, truly, patience was necessary. The lips that could so aptly form the melodious syllables of the most beautiful of languages were awkward beyond belief at mouthing out the thick words and strangely constructed phrases of the Semitic tongue.

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In the days that followed his recovery Charmides passed the hours of the march in profound reveries, which, as the days went by, became troubled. One afternoon, after long deliberation, he made his way to Hodo's tent. That little fellow was sitting cross-legged on a rug, drinking khilbum from a bronze cup, and blinking thoughtfully at the stretch of yellow sand before him.

Hodo gave cordial greeting to the Greek, proffered him wine, and then sank once more into silence. Charmides disposed of his beverage at a draught, and, after a little hesitancy, looked at his companion and asked:

"Hodo, how many gods do thy people worship?"

The Babylonian looked up quickly. "Twelve—of the great gods, without Asshur, whom the Assyrians brought among us, besides many demons, many spirits, and Mulge and Allât of the under-world. Why do you ask?"

"Because I would learn which it is among your gods that is winged with silver, crowned with stars, dressed in a purple vesture, and carries in his right hand a lyre of gold."

Hodo screwed his face into a puzzled knot. "Stars—wings—purple vesture—lyre—I do not know. Never have I heard that any of the gods carried a lyre. It is not an instrument much known to us. In the sacred scriptures Bel is said to carry a staff, and I have seen him on the walls of the temple with wings. So also Namtar flies. But the rest—how do you know these things?"

"This god appeared to me in a dream," replied the rhapsode.

Hodo found nothing to say to this, and Charmides also was silent. The Babylonian refilled their wine-cups, and, after they had been emptied, the Greek rose and left the tent, unsatisfied, yet deterred by an indefinable feeling from talking further on the subject of the vision. [Pg 90]

So the weeks went by, and the moon waned and grew young again, until, upon the twenty-first day after leaving Damascus, they were but forty-eight hours out of the Great City. That afternoon, just after the start was made, when the camels, after more water than usual, were moving briskly over the sand, Charmides' eyes, wandering to the distant horizon, encountered something that set his heart wildly throbbing.

"Hodo! Hodo!" he shouted. "It is the city! Look! The Great City!"

From Hodo, in front, there came, after a minute's look, a ringing laugh. "Yes, it is the ghost of the false city. We see it often here in the desert, as we see lakes and trees that are not. Truly it is a strange thing."

Charmides heard him incredulously. Before his eyes was certainly a vision of mighty walls, and square towers, and gates, and many-roofed palaces outlined against the heat-blurred sky. They kept their places, too, seeming to grow more and more distinct as the caravan proceeded. The rhapsode closed his eyes and opened them again. It was still there. Yes, he could now see the groups of palm-trees and faint outlines of olive foliage around the walls; and presently, when a broad, blue river was to be seen winding its way from east to west through the plain, Charmides turned on his camel and called to Tirutû behind:

"Is not yonder city indeed Babylon, Tirutû?"

But the trader smiled and slowly shook his head, and Charmides, half angry and wholly unconvinced, turned again to the sight that entranced him. Clear and straight, for ten minutes more, it stood out against the sky. Then, of a sudden, the city vanished in one quiver, and, where it had been, only the dark horizon-line, straight and unbroken, stretched away as usual. Charmides was sad that the dream had vanished; but he could laugh at himself when Hodo turned to look at him with good-natured amusement. Still, the picture remained with him, and came to seem, in after years, his first impression of the far-famed city that was to be his home. [Pg 91]

The march that night was more rapid than usual, and the halt next day not made till the heat was past bearing. At the noon meal mirth ran high, and wine and water were drunk with an abandon possible only to men who had for three weeks practised a cruel restraint. Twenty-four hours more would bring them to Babylon, and already they were on the borders of civilization and fertility.

On this day Charmides sat apart from his companions, feeling no desire to join in their loud joy. When finally the company lay down to rest, the Greek felt that sleep was impossible for him, and he went off alone to the little tent where formerly a guard had been stationed, but which was empty now. Here he sat down upon the sand and let his thoughts hold unbridled sway. For he was standing on the threshold of his new world, and he could not but pause for a moment to think of all that he had left behind him. It was a melancholy time, but not a long, before Hodo's voice was to be heard giving the signal for the last mount. Quickly the tents were struck and bound upon the camels; and then the little procession moved away towards the line of green that bounded the yellow sands.

By morning they found on all sides fertile fields of grain, already ripening. And Charmides' sand-weary eyes rested with untold delight on the rows of wheat, millet, and sesame, barred here and there with little streams of water conducted from the broad canals that ran everywhere through the land, and filled all the year round by the great mother-stream, Euphrates. Now and then the caravan passed a mud-village set in the midst of a broad field of grass where goats, sheep, and bullocks herded and donkeys and camels were tethered side by side. The people of these villages were of the lowest Chaldaic type, nearly black, thick-lipped, large-nosed, and short of stature. Charmides regarded them with dismay. He had seen one or two negro slaves brought from northern Africa to Mazzara, and they had seemed to him less than human. Were the men of this new race all like that? Presently, however, they came upon a reassuring sight. The caravan passed one of the large stone wells that stood in the middle of a grain-field. From it a buffalo, at [Pg 92]

work in his rude tread-mill, was drawing water, and beside the animal, clothed in a long, white garment, bearing a tall jar on her head, one hand upraised, the other on her hip, stood a slight girl with a skin almost as white as Charmides' own. Her eyes and hair were shining black; but as Charmides looked at her she flashed a smile at him, showing a set of pearly teeth, and, a moment later, laughing aloud, a pure, ringing laugh, that in some way set Charmides into a cheery frame of mind for the rest of the day.

He came afterwards to know that it was not a native of Babylonia whom he saw at the well, but one of a captive race resident in this Eastern land since the year when the city of Solomon fell before the armies of the great son of Nabopolassar. But there were Babylonians also as white as the Jews, their Semitic blood having at some time been mingled with that of Aryan races, Persians, Elamites, or, perhaps, Assyrians, whom a thousand years of a colder clime had materially bleached.

This last day became fiercely hot, but no noon halt was made. Each man munched a piece of bread and a handful of dates, and drank a cup of goat's milk purchased on the way, and the camels were given twenty minutes' rest and an armful of fodder in the shade of a palm grove near a canal. Then the march was eagerly resumed, for, even now, many miles away, the gigantic walls of Nimitti-Bel, the outer wall of the city, were to be seen towering up on the horizon. At four o'clock they passed through Borsip, the suburb of Babylon, towards which Hodo cast loving eyes, for it was his home. But it was night before they entered the open gateway of Nimitti-Bel, that incredibly gigantic structure, the fame of which had spread over all the East; and it took nearly an hour to traverse the sparsely inhabited space between that and the smaller, inside wall, Imgur-Bel. And before they had reached this, Hodo, turning, called to the Greek:

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"We sleep to-night outside the gate of Bel. It is too late for admission to the city. The sun has set."

Charmides nodded an absent-minded acquiescence. His thoughts had been stunned by the first glimpse of this tremendous city, and the chaos in his mind was too great for him to pay attention to any trivial remark. Hitherto his measure of magnitude of buildings had been the new temple of Apollo at Selinous, with its length of four hundred feet, its width of two hundred, its columns more than fifty feet high: this for a temple, the third largest in the Greek world. Now he was confronted by a wall, a wall of defence, forty miles long, two hundred feet from base to summit,^[4] and of such a thickness that upon its top two four-horse chariots could pass with ease. Watch-towers, in which guards lived, rose higher still from the great wall, that was open in a hundred places, each opening provided with a gate of wrought brass, which was closed from sunset to dawn.

As the caravan neared the inner and lesser wall and approached the gate of Bel, Charmides saw that before it was a square space, well paved and arranged with stalls and booths, in which a goodly number of people evidently purposed passing the night. Each of the hundred gates was provided with a sort of customs bureau, where all goods to be sold in the city were appraised and taxed according to a fixed tariff. From this petty fee cattle, grain, and fruits were not exempt; and, since the officer of taxes was off duty from sunset till sunrise, it frequently occurred that, on a market or festival day, each rébit, or square before a gate, was occupied through the night by those that wished to enter the city early in the morning.

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As the line of weary camels came to a final halt, and the score of wearier men dismounted for the last time, there was one general, short cry of thanksgiving, in which Charmides joined as heartily as the rest; and then Hodo sought him and took him by the arm, drawing him along the square as he said:

"We will sup together, Charmides—yonder."

In a corner against the wall an enterprising merchant had set up a small restaurant of clever design, where hot wheaten cakes, roast goat's flesh, and cooked sesame, together with various fruits, flasks of fermented liquor, jars of beer, or flagons of goat's milk might be bought at a very reasonable price. Charmides rejoiced at the sight of food, for he was spent with the heat and the journey. And he offered to change one of his silver pieces for such of the food as Hodo and he desired. But this the little Babylonian would not have.

"This night is the last, my Greek. Eat with me. Many a use there will be for that silver of yours. On your first night within Nimitti-Bel you shall be my guest."

Then Charmides tried to thank his friend once more for all the voluntary and unlooked-for kindness that had been shown him since the caravan left Tyre. It was with difficulty, indeed, that the rhapsode found words fittingly sincere for his gratitude. But, long before he had finished, Hodo, with a little, deprecating gesture, stopped him.

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"You shall not thank *me*, Charmides," he said, sadly. "Rather bless those gods that gave you a face so fair and a personality so gracious that he who comes in contact with you cannot but love you. Truly, youth, I am loath to part with you; and I hope that you will not rise so high that in after-time your eyes will be above the level of mine."

Charmides' reply to this was simply to press the other's hand to his brow. Then, the two having finished their meal, they wrapped up their cloaks for cushions and sat down, with their backs to the wall, to watch the sights in the square. Charmides held his bundle on his knees, and his lyre lay beside him on the ground. He was bareheaded, and, as he sat in the shadow of the wall, his face was indistinguishable to the passers-by. Hodo was silent, and Charmides felt no inclination

to talk. His eyes wandered over the busy square, from which a clatter of talk was rising. To the Greek, looking on, it seemed as if a hundred nationalities were before him, so different were the faces, dress, and manners of the men and women passing on every side. Here a heavy-bearded, coarse-clad goatherd, with his flock around him, lay already asleep. There a company of market-girls, bare-headed, in loosely fluttering robes, stood gossiping together or laughing at the little date-merchant opposite. Before the gate were half a dozen soldiers with permits for entering the city after hours, quaffing beer, or the heavy liquor of the date-cabbage, from their helmets. Farther away a donkey-boy was beating a refractory member of his drove into submission; while, in the very centre of the square, the group of camels belonging to Hodo's caravan lay gazing loftily at the scene before them, their self-satisfied faces showing no trace of the fatigue that three long weeks upon the desert sands must surely have brought them. All these, and infinitely more, the rhapsode watched with increasing interest. New arrivals were frequent, and the square gradually became massed with people.

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"To-morrow is the eleventh of the month," observed Hodo, suddenly, from his reverie. "There will be the procession of Nebo and Nergal, and, later, a feast in the temple. That is why *so* many of the country-folk have come."

Charmides nodded assent. He was watching some one of whom he had caught sight three or four moments before—a young girl, making her way through a drove of donkeys and sheep. She was accompanied by a single large, white goat, that followed her closely, and to which she paid but little attention, seeming sure of its faithfulness. Barefooted, long-haired, raggedly clad, and very young—a mere child of fourteen or so—she was. Yet, as Charmides watched her, he found something in the quiet droop of her eyelids, the pathetic curve of her mouth, and the pallor of her tired face that stayed in his mind through the whole evening. She lingered for a moment or two outside the great gate. Then one of the soldiers, catching sight of her, left his companions to open a small inner door that led into the city. Through this the goat-girl passed, and Charmides once more turned to his companion, who was saying:

"Where do you go to-morrow, Charmides?"

The Greek paused to consider. Finally he answered, rather doubtfully: "I do not know. I seek Istar of Babylon."

Hodo smiled, pityingly. "And after that—?"

Charmides shook his head. "I do not know," he repeated.

"Charmides, you will do well to come with me and stay with me for some days, till you have learned the ways of Babylon. Will you, then—"

But the Greek quickly shook his head. "Again I thank you, Hodo. You are good to me. But Apollo, my Lord, watches over me; and the god of the golden lyre has made me well. With them I shall enter Babylon. With them I go before Istar. Say no more."

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Hodo accepted the decision without further protest. Indeed, he rather believed Charmides to be, in some respects, a little more than human. At any rate, after a few moments more of watching the still-moving throng, he wrapped his cloak about him and lay down upon the stones. Charmides shortly followed his example. And then, beneath the towering walls of the Great City, Charmides, in his dreams, knocked again upon the gate of God.

Book II

THE GREAT CITY

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I

THE Â-IBUR-SABÛ

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As the first yellow streaks of the false dawn paled in the east on this morning of the eleventh of June, the city of Babylon awoke. And by the time that Shamash had come forth from the world beyond the Euphrates, the city streets were alive with men, women, and animals. An hour later these were fixed in two long phalanxes, twenty rows deep, on either side of the Â-Ibur-Sabû—King Nebuchadrezzar's sacred way, that stretched, from the gate of Bel on the south side of the city, northward as far as the sanctuary of Istar. Half-way along its course this street, or boulevard, ran through the great square of the gods, that was to-day the centre of interest; for here, upon the right hand and upon the left, were the temples of Nebo and Nergal, whose feast-day this was. The great religious procession of gods and men was to pass from the second monastery of Zicarî southward across the canal of the Ukhatû to the temple of Istar, where they would enter upon the Â-Ibur-Sabû, and so pass directly down to the temples where the sacrifice was to be conducted by the high-priests of the temples of Bel, of Marduk, of Nebo, and of Nergal, in the presence of the Lady Istar, the gods her brothers, the king of Babylon, and the king's son. The day was an annual holiday in the city, whose three million inhabitants were now, apparently,

every one of them struggling to obtain the best position on the Â-Ibur-Sabû, just at the entrance of the square of the gods. [Pg 102]

The noise in this part of the city was such as only a vast, good-natured crowd can make. They pushed and elbowed, and indulged in guttural altercations that commanded too speedy mirth from by-standers ever to result in an actual quarrel. Frequently a commoner, driving his bullock-cart down some side street towards the main thoroughfare, would be hauled from his place to see his vehicle led back to a distant point. Men and women on donkeys, however, were permitted to trot on unmolested; for the little, mouse-colored creatures found a passage where their riders would have been wholly at fault. Now and then a drove of goats passed down the sacred way in a cloud of dust, their owner doing a thriving business in the way of selling milk from his animals to the thirsty throng. Venders of eggs, ready-cooked grain, fresh water, fruits, and sweetmeats added their long-drawn, half-incomprehensible cries to the general clamor; while at frequent intervals a squad of cavalry or the chariot of a nobleman clattered along the Â-Ibur, causing the people to scurry from beneath their hoofs, but never making the slightest move to draw up for unfortunates.

The sun rose higher, and the heat grew stifling. Water-sellers emptied their skins so rapidly that the liquid had no time to cool by evaporation before it was taken, in its tepid, nauseous state. The morning was well advanced. Children began to cry with fatigue, and men and women alike became impatient for the procession. But by the time Charmides reached the temple of Nebo there was still no sign of its approach.

The Greek had slept late, under the shadow of the great wall; and when he awoke the sun was well up, Hodo was nowhere to be seen, and the rébit was empty of those that had passed the night there. Charmides arose with a very hasty prayer to Apollo, performed some ablutions at the public well, and then, his heart beating high with long-delayed curiosity, passed the gate and went into the Great City. [Pg 103]

He entered directly upon the Â-Ibur-Sabû; and the distance from the gate to the square of the gods was not great. Plenty of people were moving in the direction of the temples, and presently the rhapsode, a little bewildered with their number, wholly interested in their appearance, halted on the right hand of the street, beside a building, to watch those around him for a little while. He remained at his vantage-point for some time, regarding with interested eyes all that passed. Finally, however, the sight of a young girl, tall, lithe, straight, with brilliant eyes and dark skin, brought him back with a start to his great object, the quest of Istar. In passing, the girl flashed an impudent little smile at him, and on impulse he ran forward, to ask her in his own way how to reach the temple of the goddess. Whether by instinct, intuition, or divine Providence, the girl understood what he said; but her quick answer was unintelligible to him, and he had only her gesture to go by. That, however, commanded him to keep to the north, and he started eagerly forward in that direction.

Fifteen minutes' rapid walking brought him to the edge of the dense crowd that bordered the square of the gods. Here the people bewildered him. He felt the heat intensely, and, incidentally, had become both thirsty and hungry. There was food and drink enough on all sides of him for sale; but the youth felt disinclined to offer a piece of his Sicilian money in exchange for a breakfast; not on account of any penurious notions, but because, utterly ignorant as he was of Babylonish coinage, he dreaded Babylonish curiosity or the ridicule that might be expressed on presentation of such foreign coins as he had. Therefore he wavered on the outer edge of the crowd, chafing with impatience, extremely uncomfortable, and still afraid to make known his needs. The throng was dense, and the Greek by no means tall enough to see over the many heads in front of him. Therefore whatever might be going on in the square beyond was quite hidden from his view. Presently he trod, by mistake, upon the fringed tunic of a man beside him. Turning to offer an apology, his eyes suddenly fell upon a face that seemed familiar—so familiar that he made an effort to remember where he had seen it before. [Pg 104]

After all, it proved to be only the little goat-girl who had been in the rébit on the previous evening. This time, however, the child saw him; and she seemed to find something in his face that kept her eyes riveted on his for a long moment, and then sent them drooping, till he could see the pretty, olive lids and the long, black lashes; while at the same time a wave of crimson swept up and over her face. Then Charmides discovered that, after all, he knew something of women. He felt at once that from this girl there would be no ridicule for him. The goat was still with her; and, as he went quickly to her side, he perceived, round the creature's neck, a metal cup on a string, the purpose of which vessel he was not slow to guess.

The girl waited for Charmides, and pushed her goat away for him with evident pleasure. As he halted, her big eyes were upraised, and her look travelled ingenuously from his sunlit hair over his burned face down to his roughly sandalled feet. Then she watched him open the little money-bag that he had drawn from his bundle. From it he extracted a silver piece, stamped with the parsley sprig of Selinous, and, holding it out to her, he pointed from the cup on the goat to his own lips and then back to the animal again. The business was done. Baba, disregarding the proffered money, knelt down beside the docile animal and obtained Charmides' belated breakfast with a practised hand.

Charmides drank the warm milk with relish, and, the cup emptied, placed his coin inside it and returned it to the girl. She took it with a shy smile, that suddenly vanished when she perceived the silver. Picking up the coin, she examined it for some seconds. Then, while Charmides looked on uneasily, Baba opened a pouch at her side, extracted therefrom a handful of small, copper [Pg 105]

disks, and held them out to the Greek, saying something to him at the same time. He shook his head and smiled at her as he accepted them. They were all alike: little scraps of stamped copper, which he afterwards learned to be *se*, the smallest of the Babylonish coins.

The chief matter of the moment thus satisfactorily concluded, the Greek lingered still at Baba's side, debating on the advisability of questioning her further. She seemed not disinclined to conversation, and as he glanced at her furtively he found her eyes again fixed upon his face. He answered the look, and then, with the usual effort, said, in the thick way of the Babylonians, the one word:

"Ishtar."

Baba appeared to understand him at once. "Belit will come to the square of the gods and the temples there in the sacred procession," she said, pointing at the same time to the north along the *Â-Ibur-Sabû*.

Charmides understood the gesture, not the words; and, thanking her in his own language, he left her, not without a vague hope that he might find her again some time. As he strode away he did not know how longingly Baba's eyes followed him; how for a few steps she crept after him, this new god with the hair of gold, and how at length, abashed by the thought of her own boldness, she sat down beside her goat and addressed a fervent prayer to Lady Istar to send peace to her thoughts.

Meantime the object of this homage was hurrying down a narrow street that ran westward; and, having a good notion of localities and distance, he succeeded in skirting the crowd on the square without much difficulty, and in reaching the *Â-Ibur-Sabû* again a little farther to the north. Here, indeed, the throng seemed denser than ever; and here, as Charmides now guessed, Istar herself would come in procession with the gods and priests this very morning—nay, within the hour. With the thought his heart beat furiously, his throat grew dry, and his eyes were dim. His head swam with emotion as he started to edge a way through the mass of people. Not a little to his surprise, he found this easy to do. The people voluntarily gave place to him, staring in wonder at his beauty, his bright hair, and the shining lyre that he carried in his hand. Ignorant as he was of the gigantic system of superstition that formed the foundation of the Chaldaic religious life, he still concluded, vaguely, that they were regarding him as something more than human, all these people that inclined a little as he usurped their room. As a matter of fact, he had been identified by some as one of the *Annunâki*, or earth-spirits; by others as one of the band of *Îgigî*, or heavenly beings, come among them to-day to do honor to his lords and theirs, the great gods of civil administration and of learning, Father Nebo and his son Nergal.

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Here was Charmides at last at his journey's end, standing in the heart of the Great City, upon the *Â-Ibur-Sabû*, the ziggurat of Nebo on his right hand, the house of the high-priest of Bel opposite, the broad Euphrates winding through the sunshine far in front, and, somewhere to the north, moving towards him from her holy temple, Istar, the living goddess of the city of kings. It all seemed a dream to him now. The miles that lay between him and his home had put him into another life, still unreal, but always more and more tangible as he looked around and moved and breathed. The great multitude hardly caught his attention. He wished himself free to think under the spell of the new world. But now, far up the street, could be seen a whirling cloud of dust, in which low-moving forms were all but hidden. These presently resolved into three droves of animals—goats, bullocks, and sheep for the sacrifice, driven by eunuchs of the temple. The horns of the bullocks were gilded, and the necks of the smaller beasts were twined with wreaths of flowers—just as the hecatombs of Zeus were ornamented at home. Charmides watched the flocks pass with joy at his heart. The familiar sight made Babylon homelike to him. His fingers sought the strings of his lyre, and he hummed to himself a genial little tune, that ceased when there rose about him a murmur of exclamations, followed by a quick silence. Charmides turned his eyes to the north. There again was dust; this time gleaming with brass-work and glinting with trappings of horses. Into the silence came a distant sound of cymbals and wooden flutes. The great procession was moving—was coming. *She* was coming—Istar—the Lady of Babylon—the Divine One.

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The crowd on either side of the street voluntarily pressed back to allow a wider space for the passage of the gods. No one was speaking now, and Charmides himself was breathless with expectation. The wavering dust-cloud advanced towards the square, and the blare of trumpets grew louder, yet the procession seemed barely to move. Distant shouts of praise and acclamation could be heard, and there was a short, silent struggle for place. That was all. Everything waited.

Presently a phalanx of men, marching in excellent order and at a rapid pace, resolved from the dust and passed the house of the high-priest. These wore the regulation priest's tunic of white muslin; but they had no goat-skins on the shoulder, and the knives in their girdles proclaimed them slayers of the sacrifice. They were, in fact, *Zicarû*, or under-priests, from the monastery below the temple of Nebo. Behind them came a chariot, in which stood one man, a tall, muscular fellow, dark and bearded, with the goat-skin over his left arm, a golden girdle about his waist, and a rosetted tiara on his head—*Vul-Ramân* of the great *Bit-Yakin*,^[5] high-priest of Nebo, and, next to *Amraphel* of Bel, the most powerful official of the priesthood. Behind him, borne on the shoulders of six *Enû*, or elders, and surrounded by a group of sixteen anointers (*Pasisû*), and officials of the libation (*Ramkû*), was the great bronze statue of *Bel-Marduk*, the father-god of the city, before whose passage the people bent their heads and prayed. After this idol came his priest *Amraphel*, ruler of the Babylonish orders, in his dazzling chariot, wearing a leopard-skin over his

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cloudy tunic. Charmides looked into the face of this man, and in the one glance experienced a curious sensation—a sense of evil that he never quite forgot.

Now there came an apparently endless string of temple-servants, priests in chariots, and little gods carried by their worshippers. Also there were groups of prophets (Asipû), dream-interpretors (Makhatû), and the great seer Nâbu-bani-âkhi. Charmides watched them all go by without great interest, for his expectation was becoming keener. Each moment he thought to perceive, in the distance, *her*; and by the heart-throb that followed the thought he knew that he should recognize her presence from afar. As time passed, however, he began to grow fearful lest, after all, she was not; lest Kabir, first, and afterwards Hodo and the rest, had spoken falsely, had deceived him, had brought him to this great, lonely place, out of his world, with no hope of return, and no prospect in life. The thought brought a spasm of fear to his heart. Yet—yet—there, up the line, was a great burst of music from a band of musicians that surrounded a new, dazzling chariot, in which stood a solitary figure, clad—Charmides turned faint and shut his eyes. Then, hearing shouts of acclamation, he opened them again, fearfully, and looked up to behold—a man.

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The first feeling was wholly of bewilderment. Then, as the rhapsode's eyes saw more, they forgot to fall. If Istar of Babylon was a man, at least he was one to look upon with wonder. Never before had Charmides beheld so imperial a face. Never had he imagined such features. The skin, as compared with his own, was very dark; yet it was whiter than that of any other Chaldee. Black hair, cut almost short, clustered about the head. The face was smooth-shaven, after the custom of the royal house; and, though Charmides could not see it from where he stood, the eyes were blue—the deep, purplish blue of a storm-cloud. The man wore the dress of the priesthood, yet it went incongruously with his bearing. Power and the habit of command stood out in every line of his figure, in the Zeus-like poise of the head, in the hand that controlled the two powerful black horses which drew the chariot along. If this were Istar—well, Charmides could hardly regret. So much he muttered aloud, in Phœnician. To his amazement, the words were answered from behind him:

"That is no Istar, fool! That is Belshazzar, the prince royal, the tyrant of Babylon."

"And Istar—the goddess!" cried the Greek, turning to the man that spoke.

"The creature Istar? She comes," was the frowning reply made by the hook-nosed, ill-kempt man at his shoulder.

Charmides said no more. His pulses were throbbing violently. At a little distance he perceived a new vehicle, a triumphal-car, at the approach of which the great masses of people to the right and left sank, as a man, to their knees, bowing to the dust. Charmides raised his eyes and beheld her sitting upon the broad platform of the car. And as he looked, as he knelt, even as his brow touched the ground, Charmides knew that he had not been deceived, that rumor had spoken truth, because more than truth could not here be spoken. Yet when she had passed, the Greek did not know her. He had not seen so much as a line of her figure. She swam in a glory of light that radiated from herself. Her head had been crowned, yet with what he did not know. His heart and head were afire, and he heeded nothing more of the procession. Most of all, he did not hear the words of the man behind him, who had knelt with the rest at the approach of the car, because fear of death is a great leveller; but had the words that he muttered been heard and understood by the populace, it is doubtful whether all his influence had saved his life from them.

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"Asha confound this instrument of evil! Yahveh's wrath light upon her soul! God of Judea visit her with the fires of Sheol!" And then the former servant of Nebuchadrezzar the Great rose and turned away through the crowd. Charmides later sought vainly for his Phœnician-tongued informant, whom men to-day call Daniel the prophet.

While the Greek still stood, dazed and stupid, his head swimming with the delight of knowing her actually to be, the procession passed, and a great multitude of people swept along at its heels towards the temple square. Any attempt to force a passage through that packed throng would have been useless. This Charmides perceived at once, and presently, as the crowd melted away from where he stood, he turned and began to walk slowly towards the north, along the Â-Ibur-Sabû. In the street there were not a few people who, like himself, had felt it useless to try for a place to see the sacrifice, and, the procession over, were on the way home, perhaps to some family festival. But Charmides saw little enough of those around him. His feet moved mechanically while his thoughts soared.

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He had seen her—he had seen Istar. The object of his journey was over; and yet—to leave Babylon now, without knowing more of her, was impossible. He felt that while Babylon was the shrine of such a being, in Babylon he must worship. Sicily, his friends, his mother, were now become things of another life—things fair and dear to think upon, but for which he no longer yearned. Istar, far above his reach as she was, yet made his interest, his religion—in fine, his home—in this new land.

It was while such thoughts as these were mingling in his heart that the Greek found himself brought to a halt. He had come to the end of the famous street that terminated in a square nearly two miles north of the temples of Nebo and his son and the square of the gods. On the edge of the new square Charmides paused and looked around him. Beside him, to the right and to the left, were two large buildings of the usual brick, low-roofed, and surrounded by walls in which the great wrought bronze gates were shut. Through their bars he caught glimpses of fair gardens filled with flowers of brilliant hues and shaded by flowering bushes and tall date-palms. But in

these places there was no sign of life; nor was any living creature to be seen on the flat roofs that served, in Babylon, the purpose of summer living-rooms. On the right-hand side of the square stood what was unmistakably a temple. Here, on the top of the broad platform, and again on the steps ascending it, and about the open doors of the holy house, several people moved, while others were dotted on the broad incline that ran around the outside of the ziggurat, or tower, without which no holy building was complete, and which stood, campanile-like, to the left of the temple itself.

Glad of company, even that of total strangers, and seeing that the platform stair offered opportunity for a much-needed rest, Charmides moved wearily across the square, mounted a step or two, and sat down with a long sigh of relief. Near him were three or four people—venders of various commodities suited to the place. An old man held between his knees a basket of small, clay bricks, inscribed with Accadian prayers. Close to him was a scribe of a semi-religious order, ready provided with cuneiform iron and a supply of kneaded clay. A little beyond, a street water-carrier had stopped to rest, with his heavy pigskin beside him. Nearest of all was a young girl, holding on her lap a basket of nosegays. The picture in itself was pleasing; but Charmides soon discovered about it something that interested him much more. This was the sight of half a wheaten loaf and a handful of dates that lay, nearly covered with a bit of cloth, in a corner of the flower-basket.

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The nourishment in Charmides' early breakfast of goat's milk had not served to keep up his strength so long as this, and now the sight of solid food made him faint for it. He hesitated a little what to do; for he could not be sure whether what he saw were the girl's noonday meal or the remains of it. Having gazed long and eagerly, however, at the loaf, he suddenly lifted his eyes to encounter her own—very pretty ones they were—fixed on him with a mixture of curiosity and admiration. Thereupon courage born of hunger came upon the rhapsode with a mighty rush. He rose and went over to the side of the flower-girl, and, taking from his bag the coppers given him by Baba, he proffered them all to the flower-seller. Smiling till she showed a very pretty set of small, white teeth, she picked up all her remaining bouquets and held them up to him in both hands. Charmides looked at them lovingly, but shook his head. With surprise written in her face, the girl put them down again and seemed to wait for him to speak. Thereupon Charmides seated himself carefully on the other side of the basket, put one finger on the wheaten loaf, pointed to his mouth, and looked inquiringly at his new friend. She understood instantly, and, laughing, took up the food and set it before the Greek.

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While he ate they talked—in the universal language of primitive sounds and gestures. And so skilful at this occupation did the two of them find themselves, that Charmides shortly learned how the girl had partaken of her noon meal some time before, and that he was quite welcome to what was left of it. Hereupon the rhapsode spread out all his *se*, nine of them, in a neat row, and suggested that she take as many as the bread and fruit were worth. The maiden hesitated over this part of the affair, but, as Charmides was quite firm, she finally picked out three of the coppers and put them in a little pouch hanging from her girdle; and Charmides perceived, without much thinking about it, that this pouch was the counterpart of that from which Baba had that morning extracted his change.

During his meal, which Charmides caused to last for some time, his eyes were much employed. He was making a careful scrutiny of his new companion—one so very careful that, in the interest of it, the awe and fiery enthusiasm excited in him by the sight of Istar was gradually dispelled. Thus he came gracefully down to human interests, and discovered that this Babylonian maid was rather more to his taste than any Doric Sicilian he could remember.

In very truth, Ramûa of Beltani's house, the flower-girl of the temple of the great goddess, was a goodly sight for tired eyes. Young and fresh of color, sweet of voice, and modest of demeanor she always was. To be sure, her long tunic was colorless, old, and much patched. Her pretty feet were bare, and her only head-covering the long, silken hair that was plaited and coiled round and round her shapely head. But it had been a pity to hide those glossy locks under the rarest of coronets. No jewels that she could have worn would have rivalled her eyes in brilliancy; and as for the small, brown feet—Charmides surveyed them covertly with unique enjoyment, and could not remember to have seen a sandal fit to grace them.

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Musing in this profitable fashion, the rhapsode finished his meal, and invested another *se* in the purchase of a cup of water from the water-seller. This he proffered first to the girl, who refused it with exceeding grace, and a very definite hope in her eyes that the sunny Greek would not yet depart. Evidently he had ideas of so doing, for, returning to her side, but not sitting down, he once more pronounced his pass-word:

"Istar?"

"This is her temple," was the quick reply, as Ramûa pointed to the top of the platform.

Charmides caught hopefully at the gesture. "This is the temple of Istar? The goddess will return here?" he asked, uselessly, in Greek.

Ramûa smiled at him.

Charmides felt irritated and helpless. He looked from the girl to the temple, and back again. Then he paused, wavered, might perhaps have cursed in his own tongue, and finally sat down again where he had been before. Silence ensued. Ramûa played in a very unbusiness-like way with a flower, till she had spoiled it. Charmides, more stolid and less concerned, stared out upon the

sunny square and down the far stretch of the Â-Ibur-Sabû, from which far-distant sounds of music came faintly to his ears. Gradually he fell into a noonday reverie, from which he was roused by Ramûa, who, hoping perhaps to attract his attention, had lifted his lyre and was running her hand over its strings. Charmides looked up at her in surprise, and at once she held the instrument out to him, motioning him to play. Nothing loath, he took it, stood up, and turned to her. For a moment his hand wandered among the strings. Then he found the melody he sought, and sang it to her in full-throated, mellifluous Greek—the myth of the Syracusan nymph, Arethuse, and Alpheus, the river-god.

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The flower-girl listened spellbound to such sounds as she had never heard before; and, on stopping, Charmides found a group of pedestrians, attracted by his song, standing near at hand behind him. One of them, a stiff-robed, high-crowned nobleman, tossed him a piece of money at the conclusion of the poem. Charmides took it up with a momentary impulse to throw it back at the man. Prudence, however, came to his aid, and, after a moment of inward rebellion, he accepted the coin, realizing that chance had just shown him a way for a future livelihood. He might, perhaps, have sung again, but for an interruption that claimed the attention of every one around the temple.

The noise of distant trumpets had become much louder, and two specks afar down the Â-Ibur-Sabû had by now resolved themselves into a two-horse chariot and the car of Istar—both of them coming towards the temple.

Charmides' heart bounded as he distinguished the radiant figure that sat upon the golden platform of the divine vehicle. So he was to see her again—now—so soon. This time, if she passed him closely, she might even see him. And if her eyes should fall upon him—*had* she eyes? Had she features and organs? Was she, in fact, anything but a mystic vision that people saw dizzily and turned from, half blinded? He glanced down at the flower-girl by his side, and it came over him with a rush of pleasure that she was human and susceptible to human emotions.

Istar's car approached the platform steps. It was followed by the attendant chariot, in which Charmides once more beheld Belshazzar, the "tyrant of Babylon," whom at first sight he had reckoned as a demi-god. As the car stopped, the prince leaped from his place and went to stand near the goddess as she alighted. The little company of people that had assembled to watch Istar's arrival, bent the knee. Charmides alone remained upright—why, he could not have told. Certainly it was not from lack of reverence. His eyes were fixed upon the form of Istar, while with all the strength of his mind he strove to pierce the veil of impenetrable, dazzling light that hung about her like a garment. As she rose from her sitting posture, Charmides looked to see her slaves offer assistance in her descent from the high place. But the eunuchs at her horses' heads did not move, and Belshazzar stood motionless on the first step, his head slightly bowed, but his strange eyes fixed as eagerly as Charmides' own.

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Presently the goddess was beside the prince. How she had descended, Charmides did not know. He seemed to have seen her float down a shaft of light to the ground.

After performing the proper obeisance to their lady, the people rose, as Istar, with Belshazzar at her elbow, began to ascend the platform steps. Charmides could see that her feet moved, yet they barely touched the bricks. He did not know, however, that a year ago she had had no need for steps. As yet, it had never even been whispered by any man that she was more than formerly of earth.

One, two, three stairs Istar mounted. The young Greek was choking with excitement. In another moment she would be abreast of him—nay, was abreast of him, had ceased to move, had turned her head. Belshazzar, on the other side, halted in astonishment. Charmides' heart stopped. He found himself looking into a pair of great, unfathomable eyes that gazed into his own with the light of all knowledge. At the look, courage, confidence, and an unspeakable joy took possession of him. Without amazement he heard her speak to him in his own tongue.

"Welcome, thou Charmides, to Babylon! I had word of your coming when Allaraine banished thy desert fever, in order that the Great City, and I in it, should know thy voice."

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"Istar!"

"The journey has been long, and has taken patience and fortitude."

"The way has been but a dream of my goddess. Long ago, through Lord Apollo, I beheld thee."

"Yes—in the temple of Selinous—that dedicated to Apollo, who is Allaraine to me. Charmides, you have no home in Babylon. Will you take up an abode in that of the flower-girl beside you?"

Charmides made no answer in words. Turning a little towards the young girl, who stood, pale and wide-eyed, on his right hand, he smiled at her.

Then Istar also turned to Ramûa, and spoke in Chaldaic: "Thou, maiden, take you at evening-time this stranger home to the house of your mother, Beltani, and keep him there as he were one of you; and in return he will bring you great happiness. This is my wish."

Ramûa fell again upon her knees and bowed her head upon the clay bricks. She was incapable of speech; but the flush of crimson that had overspread her face told Istar that the command would not be unwillingly obeyed. Then the goddess turned again to the Greek.

"Charmides, go thou home to-night with the maiden here. Her name is called Ramûa, and she is of her mother Beltani, that is a widow. At sunset, when her flowers are gone, follow you after her. And again you shall come to me in my temple and play to me the music of your lyre. You have heard the chords of Allaraine of the skies. They shall come again to you to fill your heart with peace, and you shall be the most wonderful of all musicians in the Great City. Let, then, far Sicily, vanish forever from your mind."

Charmides bowed low. His tongue was tied with awe. He knew not what reply to make to her. When he lifted his eyes again she had passed, and was floating like a silver cloud across the great platform towards the open portals of the temple. Thereupon the Greek turned his face to Ramûa, and, as he clasped her hand in his and saw her black eyes lifted up, he laughed in his heart with joy of the Great City, and what he had found it to hold for him.

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II THE SANCTUARY OF ISTAR

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The temple of the Lady of Erech,^[6] in Babylon, was the smallest of the eight temples consecrated to the worship of the twelve great gods. This temple contained but three parts—the entrance hall, the great hall of the sacrifice, and, at the farthest end of this room, the inmost shrine, or holy of holies, where the statue of the god was generally kept. Besides these, there were half a dozen little places, hardly more than niches, where the priestesses and hierodules could don sacrificial garments. At the end of the great hall, in front of the rich curtain that hid the door of the inmost shrine, and behind the sacrificial altar and the table for shew-bread, was the Parakhû, or mercy-seat, from which the god, generally in spirit, it was thought, was accustomed to hear and answer the prayers of his worshippers, to perform miracles of healing, and to accept offerings. Here, each day, Istar was accustomed to sit for an hour, hearing many complaints, listening to many woes, learning much of the piteous side of the lives of men and women of the world. And from this place Istar had delivered many an oracle. Here, too, she cogitated painfully over the sins of mankind, which were all incomprehensible to her. She, who was alone of her race on earth, sorrowed most over the loneliness of others—those that mourned a friend dead, a lover lost, a child in far-off lands—because this grief she could in some measure understand. But though the face of the goddess was always sad when she left the mercy-seat, the brilliance of her aureole was more bewildering than ever, for pity quickened her divinity continually to fresh life.

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Behind the temple of worship was the building in which Istar dwelt. It was a little labyrinth of small, open courts and narrow, dimly lighted rooms. Nearer to the dwelling-place than to the temple, on the same platform with them both, was the ziggurat—that most characteristic feature of Babylonian architecture. On top of it, in the centre of the space used by astronomers and astrologers attached to the temple, was the little room devoted to the person of the goddess. It was here that she was supposed to sleep by night when wearied with the labors of the long day. Istar's chamber on her ziggurat was rendered almost unapproachably sacred by the fact that here she had first been found; here she was supposed to have undergone her incarnation; and probably here she would resume intangibility, when her period of life on earth was over. In point of fact Istar was devoted to this little place. During the hot summer months she generally stayed within it from sunset to dawn, perhaps asleep, perhaps fled in spirit to other regions. The place had been fitted up with incredible costliness, and was kept in scrupulous order by servants consecrated especially for the work, who entered it only at stated periods when its mistress was absent.

On her return from the long ceremonials attendant on the sacrifice to Nebo and Nergal, Istar went to the mercy-seat at once, for it was past her accustomed hour. There were few suppliants for pity to-day. Babylon had just propitiated two of its great gods with a wholesale slaughter of animals, and the people doubtless felt that for a day, at least, they might rest from the continual round of religious duties, relying meantime on the newly invigorated power of Nebo and Nergal to protect them from the legions of hellish and earthly demons that beset life with such innumerable ills.

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Istar's hour was not long to her. Her thoughts were centred on Charmides, his young, sunny presence, and the light of wonder and worship in his face when she had spoken to him. She had seen that he carried his lyre with him; and she dreamed of the day when he should come before her and sing as none other but Allaraine could sing. Meantime his face was before her and would not be banished, although in the shadows before the altar stood another man whose presence had long been part of her surroundings, towards whom she felt—if indeed she felt at all—as towards no other human being; whose whole presence was as perfect a contrast to that of Charmides as could well be imagined. It was Belshazzar, who, since matters of government did not much hold him, had, in the last months become Istar's shadow. He lingered about the temple whenever she was there; he followed her over the city in his chariot when she went abroad; at sunset he ascended the ziggurat, to stand outside the curtained door of her sanctuary, unable to see her, but feeling her presence. When she was near him his eyes were not always upon her, yet her slightest movement never escaped him. And at such times a kind of divinity—a reflection, perhaps, from her—was thrown about him, till it had once or twice been said that the prince, like his goddess, moved in a silver cloud. Whether or not it was possible that Belshazzar—Belshazzar

the tyrannical, the dissolute, the fierce-tempered—had by dint of will-power and persistence been able to pierce the veil that hid Istar secure from all mortal eyes, it would be impossible to tell. Istar herself did not know. But now, as many times before, she wondered vaguely if her unearthly powers would or would not hold her from the understanding of this unholy man.

The mercy hour over, two attendant ûkhatû approached her with the purifying water and her white garment for the evening. Istar washed away from her own person the sins and sorrows of her suppliants, suffered the robe to be laid over her shoulders, and then sent away the women, forbidding the temple to be lighted till she was gone from it, and commanding the dismissal of the two that prayed near the basin of the sea. So, presently, she was alone in the vast, shadowy room with Belshazzar, who still stood, silent, immovable, arms folded, head slightly bent, beside the shew-table, his storm-blue eyes fixed in a side glance on her face.

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Istar rose and descended from the high place, and then moved slowly in her floating way to Belshazzar's side. There, a few inches from him, she halted, and, putting forth her hand, laid it lightly on his arm.

A tremor of intense feeling shot through him. He shook for a moment as with palsy. Then, raising both hands in the attitude of prayer, he uttered the one word—"Belit!"

Istar regarded him with a kind of curiosity. "Bel-shar-utsur," she said, lingeringly, with a suggestion of hesitation. Again the prince trembled. "Bel-shar-utsur—wilt thou follow me?"

"To the kingdom of Lillât, if my goddess asks," he answered, quickly, in a maze of confused delight.

The light of her divinity burned brighter round the figure of the goddess, and she made a slight gesture for the man to walk beside her. He obeyed with an eagerness that was tempered by a peculiar, half-resisted reluctance which Istar perceived but did not understand; for the soul of this majestic body was unknown, utterly unknown to her.

Together, however, they left the temple and passed across the deserted platform, which was still flooded with sunlight, till they reached the foot of the ziggurat. Here Belshazzar halted with a quick breath and an inaudible exclamation. Istar, turning a little towards him, gave him a wondering glance.

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"You fear?" she asked, hardly knowing how to voice her idea.

And Belshazzar, he who had in his youth, in pursuance of amusement, swum the Euphrates lashed to the back of a wounded crocodile, now raised his hands again, saying imploringly: "O Belit!—I fear!"

"And what? Is it I?"

He bent his head.

"Belshazzar—come thou and teach me."

"Teach—you!"

"Yea, for there is much that I must know. There, on the ziggurat, where the air is sweet, where we shall be nearer the silver sky, thou shalt learn the purpose of my earth-life, and shalt tell me how to attain it; for I of myself know not the way. Come."

This time Belshazzar obeyed the command without hesitation, silently. Together they made the ascent of the broad, inclined plane that wound round and round up the tower. The man's steps were swinging and vigorous; yet, walk as rapidly as he would, the goddess kept always a little ahead of him though she made neither effort nor motion, except that now and then she touched her feet lightly to the bricks. At the top, opening from the broad gallery that ran round the building of the tower, was the low door-way that gave entrance to the holy of holies, Istar's shrine. There was no one on the height to-day, though ordinarily at this hour several ascended the ziggurat to watch the ascent of the goddess. Rejoicing in the solitude, Istar leaned over the south parapet of the wall, and looked out upon the light-flooded city, while Belshazzar, in a dream, waited at her shoulder. After a little while she turned, and, pushing aside the leathern curtain that hung across the door, conducted the prince over the threshold of the sacred place.

It was a wonderful room. At the time of the coming of Istar, indeed, all Babylon had contributed to its adorning. Not more than ten feet square was the little place, yet so did it glisten and shine with the lustre of clear gems and burnished gold, that it seemed to contain unfathomable depths, and to be imbued with something of the divine radiance of its mistress. The couch in it, like the walls, was covered with plates of beaten gold, and piled high with the softest and costliest stuffs from the famous Babylonian looms. The throne and the two chairs, or tabourets, were of Indian ebony, inlaid with ivory; and the table and deep basin for water were of chased silver, worked with crystals and emeralds. All the daylight that could enter this room must come through the arched door-way; but a swinging-lamp of wrought gold, hanging in the centre of the little place, burned continually, night and day, and shed a dim effulgence over everything.

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When this interior was first revealed to him, Belshazzar halted where he stood, gazing around with self-contained pleasure till Istar, seating herself on the great chair that was her throne, motioned him to one of the lower seats. Belshazzar sat in her presence, and a silence fell between them: a silence that the prince could not have broken had his life been at stake. Istar, looking

from her place out through the door-way into the tower-tipped sky, seeming not to feel in the slightest the great discomfort of her guest, finally said, softly:

"Belshazzar, from thy heart, tell me, what are thy gods?"

The man looked at her in quick amazement. For an instant he was about to speak on impulse. Then he resisted; and when he did make answer the reply was conventional. "Thou, Istar, art my goddess. Babylon is mine only god."

"That last thou hast said well. Yet it, too, is a false god."

"But thou, O Istar, I know—"

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"I am no goddess, Belti-shar-utsur."

The prince started nervously to his feet. "You are not mortal?"

"No. I think, indeed, that I am not. Yet I am not sure. You came to earth a baby, born of woman—is it not so?"

"Like all men."

"And I descended from the highest void through space, till I touched earth almost upon this spot, a woman as I am now, clothed in my silver garment. It was by the command of god, the great Bel, the One, the True, that I came hither from the upper realms of the great kingdom. I was what they call archetype. I was decreed to pass through the fire of the world and return not to my home till the hearts of men were bare before my eyes, till I learned the secret of the creation. Yet how these things are to be shown to me I do not know. Thy heart, O Belshazzar—what is it?"

"It is thine, Lady of All."

"Open it to me that I may read."

The pleading simplicity of the tone made Belshazzar look at her sharply, and in a new way. Still his eyes failed to pierce the wave of baffling light that flowed about her; and still her purpose was enigmatical to him. She had become more incomprehensible than ever.

"The hearts of men, Istar, are not always known to themselves. Mine I could not show you."

Istar thought for a little while in troubled silence. Then she asked once more, not hopefully: "Your loves and hates, your joys and sorrows, your hopes and fears—knowing these, could I not understand them and you?"

"It may be. I do not know."

"Then let me hear, that I may judge."

"All of them, Istar—love, hate, hope, fear, joy, sorrow—are woven around my city, Babylon, the gate of god. My love is for her and my fear for her enemies. As she is the greatest of all cities, so is she the most loved and the most hated. In her lie all my joy and sorrow. In her dwell many that I love, some that I hate, one that I fear. But this—"

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"This will not open to me your secret heart, Belshazzar. It is an affectation."

"By the power of the twelve great gods—it is not!"

"Then there are two lives in you: this one, and another that is hidden."

Belshazzar looked at her again strangely. "It is true," he said, at length, a curious smile curving his lips.

"It is of this second life that you must tell me."

"I cannot!" he said, quickly.

"Wherefore?"

"It is too ignoble for your ears."

"Too ignoble? What should be that for me? Nay, prince of the city, my earth-life is weary and long, because that I am kept away from life. I am set apart, worshipped as one afar off, and true life is not laid before me. To teach your race the secret of the one god is forbidden. It is I that come hither to learn; yet I am given no way of learning. What am I? Whither am I to go, that I may learn truth from the hearts of men?"

"Hearts, Divine One, may read each other. But no immortal that cannot feel the world may understand them."

"Let me, then, become mortal, O God!"

The cry rang out louder than it had been spoken, and seemed to echo forth, to vibrate through the room, to flow out and away into the distant sky. The two in the sanctuary listened to it in silence, wondering. Then Istar, tremulous, and wavering with light, arose.

"Leave me, Belshazzar!" she cried, suddenly. "Leave me alone here! I fear you!"

"Fear me?" He spoke softly, taking the attitude of prayer. "You are the goddess of Babylon. It is I that fear. I beseech thee, lady, spare me thy wrath. As a reed shalt thou bend me. As a twig shall I be broken before the strength of thy will. Divine One, grant me favor! Lady Belit, have pity upon my mortality!"

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As he spoke she stood looking at him, shrinkingly, uncertainly, trying to fathom the false ring of the conventional phrases. His attitude, his expression, his demeanor, were perfectly sincere; yet, whether he himself were conscious of it or not, the words were not honest. She perceived it instantly. After the little pause of thought she repeated, faintly:

"Depart from me!" adding, afterwards, "You mock at me."

The prince drew a quick breath that sounded like a gasp. Then, coming forward, he sank to his knees, took the hem of her fiery garment, and held it for a moment to his lips. Its flame did not harm. Rather, it sent through his whole being a shock of vitality. Rising hurriedly after the obeisance, he inclined himself again before her and swept away, as she had commanded, leaving her alone in her sanctuary.

Istar remained where he left her, lying back in the chair, one hand supporting her cheek, her thoughts chaotic and troubled as never before. For many months past she had felt, vaguely, that which had just definitely come home to her. Her time on earth was passing uselessly away. She was now no closer to mankind than she had been before her descent. She was treated with such reverent awe as utterly precluded anything like familiar intercourse with any one. The very prayers were addressed to her in terms as florid and as general as possible. Her personal attendants performed their duties in silent reverence. The priesthood treated her with the impenetrable respect that they showed towards the graven images of the gods. And now, for the first time, the significance of all these things came to her definitely. She perceived how they were baffling her purpose, and the thought caused her deep disquiet. There seemed to be but one way of opening life to her immortal vision. It was through the person of Belshazzar, who dared, before her, to keep his individuality. This way, however, as she had told him, she feared. What the fear was, when it had come or why, who could tell? Not Istar. Now, for so long a time the prince had been part of her wearisome, objective existence that, up to to-night, she had been more inclined to regard him as something spiritual than as a man. Mentally she reviewed him and his personality, and she found therein much that was beyond her undeveloped powers of appreciation and analysis. His deep eyes—how was it that they looked on her? She had not seemed to him so awe-inspiring a thing as others found her. Why? His continual presence before her—was it all from a sense of pure religion? Yet, if it were not, what was the motive? Istar did not, could not, know. He did not pray to her—quite. His attitude was peculiar—distant—reverent—yet at times there was something other than reverence in his face. What it was—the look that seemed to burn through her veil—Istar could not tell. Yet it was that look that had made her fear.

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How long she sat, passive and quiet-browed within her sanctuary, thinking of these many things, she did not know. But when finally she straightened, the clouds in the east were pink with the reflected light of the setting sun.

The sky was singularly beautiful to her. It held in its far depths the mystery of her birth. She regarded it sometimes with yearning, sometimes with an unfathomable wisdom held in her inmost being. Now the curtain hid it from her gaze, and, with an oppressive sadness in her heart, she crossed to the door-way and lifted the curtain-folds, to encounter the piercing gaze of a man who stood more than half-way across the sanctuary threshold. Thin, pallid, hook-nosed, bearded, and wretchedly clothed, he stood over her radiant person and seemed to peer into her very soul—this child of the West, Beltishazzar the Jew.

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Istar gasped and shrank quickly back into the room, without letting go her hold on the curtain. Daniel pressed his advantage and intruded farther, till he also was inside. Her face was indistinguishable to him, for the light-waves had quickened protectively round her whole body, till she swam in glory. Seemingly unabashed, the Jew addressed her:

"Istar of Babylon, grant me an hour wherein I may hold speech with you—here, or without—upon the ziggurat."

There was less of entreaty than of command in the tone; and Istar, unduly affected by the fanatical appearance of the man, put his presence on a level with her own personality, and, replying to his speech in Hebrew, his language, said:

"Then enter here, O Daniel, and I will listen to you."

"You know me!" he said, quickly.

"I know men's names."

"And their hearts?"

"Their hearts! You have said it! Their hearts! Oh, thou man of Jerusalem, canst thou give me knowledge as to them?"

He looked at her closely, as if to make sure of her meaning. Then, taking courage, he replied: "Men's hearts! Who, in truth, but Yaveh, the one God, shall know them?"

Istar made no answer to the question, but once more motioned the Jew to enter the faintly lighted

room. This he did without hesitation. Thereupon she covered the door-way with its curtain, turned without any sign of haste, and seated herself once more on the high throne, but left the Jew to stand before her. Finally, before the words he had framed could leave his lips, she swayed forward slightly and asked:

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"What have you, the child of Yaveh, to gain from me?"

"Much—or nothing."

"It is no answer, Daniel."

Beltishazzar bent his head and folded his arms over his breast. So he stood for many minutes, silent and motionless, while Istar waited serenely for him to speak; and, when he spoke, she was not startled by his words and their blunt directness.

"Istar of Babylon, what are you—who are you? child of God, or instrument of the devil?—archangel, as some say, or arch-fiend, as many think? What is your mission in Babylon? Whence came you? Whither do you go?"

Istar smiled. "Neither angel nor fiend am I, Beltishazzar, but archetype of God's creation. I came from space. Into it, in time, I shall return again. My mission I have told you. I come to learn the hearts of men, their relationship to God."

As she ceased to speak she found Beltishazzar's eyes fixed upon her in a look so penetrating that it seemed impossible it should not pierce her veil. Presently, in the silence that followed, the Jew began to pace up and down the little room. He walked nervously. His brows were knitted, his shoulders drawn up, his head sunk between them in an abstraction that Istar never thought of disturbing. When, at length, he looked up at her again, she found in him a new enthusiasm, a spirituality, an exaltation even, that gleamed like fire from his sunken eyes and increased his unhealthy pallor till his skin was like that of a dead man.

"Istar," he began, in a voice low and tremulous with incipient passion—"Istar, you have said it was from God that you came hither from space—you, a heavenly being, an archangel. God despatched you to earth for an unknown purpose, a purpose that, in its fulness, hath not been confided to you, but is revealed unto me, the prophet of Nebuchadrezzar, the great king. Listen, and thou shalt feel the response of truth throb within thee at my words.

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"Forty-and-seven years ago the holy city of Judah fell before the onslaught of the Babylonian king. Zedekiah and his race were taken captive by the hands of the wicked, and were carried away into exile to the city abhorred of God—Babylon, the queen of evil. Since then, in sickness and sorrow, in captivity and death, our people have dwelt here, a piteous hunger for the promised land gnawing at their hearts, while Babylon waxed great and strong in her wickedness off the fat of many captive lands and peoples. Long have we been without hope of salvation. But now Nebuchadrezzar, the fierce ruler, is dead many years since. In his kingdom are sown the seeds of dissension and strife, and, in the weakness of her strength, she shall reap bitter fruit. For Babylon, even as Nineveh before her, must fall. At the hands of her captives shall the great city suffer destruction and death. Again in their strength the Jews shall rise up and smite the tyrant down. And now, O Istar, hear thou the word of the Lord! In this great retribution it is thou that shalt lead us, the chosen ones; thou that shalt win glory and honor among us; thou that, as Moses from Egypt, shalt lead us out of Babylonia through the wilderness, back to the land of our fathers!"

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He paused for an instant in the midst of his delight, to note the effect of his words on the woman—or angel. She sat before him radiant, wavering with light, motionless, unmoved, inscrutable, showing no desire to interrupt the flow of his words; rather, in her silence, urging him to greater heights. So he continued:

"For forty-and-seven years have we, the captives, dwelt in the land of bondage; and in that time, even with the hand of God heavy upon us, have acquired honor and riches in the country of our woe. Is it not a sign that God is with us—that he holds sacred that spot in which we dwell? Thou also art from Him! The end of our trial approaches! By night I hear the voice of the Lord crying from the high places that thou art here as a sign of His protection. And I and thou are destined to lead the children of Jerusalem out of bondage. Mine is the hand that will strike down the weak and faltering king of Babylon—Nabu-Nahid, the foolish one. At our hands priest and noble, citizen and soldier, yea, mother and infant of this unholy people, shall be made to drink of their own blood. And for thee, O Istar, shall be reserved the triumph, the deed of danger and of glory! For by thy hand, in stealth, when he shall come to worship idolatrously at thy shrine, shalt thou strike to earth the monster tyrant of the city, Nabu-Nahid's son, the child of sin, Belshazzar! Now behold—"

"Thou infamous one!"

Daniel's rush of words suddenly ceased. He paused long enough, fully enough, this time, to perceive and to understand the situation. Istar, trembling with anger and disgust, had risen from her place and towered above him like an archangel indeed. Through the blaze of light her two eyes glowed like burning coals upon the insignificant creature cowering below her. Beyond her exclamation, Istar found no words to say. The two confronted each other in palpitating stillness, and as they stood, Daniel, inch by inch, began to regain his stature, and gradually to move away, backward, towards the door. When finally he had his shoulders against the leathern curtain, and

knew his ability to effect a quick escape should it become necessary, he delivered himself of a final oracle:

"Thou thing of evil, the Lord hath stripped from mine eyes the veil! I behold thee nourishing the serpent in thy bosom. Thy master, Satan, stands at thy right shoulder. Upon the other hand is Belshazzar, thy paramour. But I say unto you that the streets of Babylon shall run with the tyrant's blood. There shall come a night when Babylon shall burst into flames; when Nabonidus will be no more; when Belshazzar's life shall be taken by the hands of his own people; when thou, in mortal terror, shalt flee the city of thy wickedness; when the Jew shall triumph over Bel, and the God of Judea lift up his sword in the heavens! Thus, in mine ear, sounds the mighty voice of the Lord!"

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Then, with one baleful gesture, and a fiery glance of hatred from his bright, black eyes, Daniel flung back the curtain of the sanctuary and slunk away, with his usual gait, out into the twilight and down the winding plane of the zigurat.

For many minutes Istar remained as she had stood while listening to the last words of the leader of the captive race. Her limbs trembled. Her eyes were dim. When presently she felt the cool breath of the evening envelop her, her senses swam. In the midst of it all, in the midst of that terrible vision that the Jew had conjured up before her, there was one thing that stood out before all else, till the rest had lost all significance. Kill Belshazzar! *She* kill Belshazzar! Over and over she repeated it to herself, unable to understand why the horror of the mere thought should be so great.

The swinging-lamp in the sanctuary mingled its dim, steady light with that of the rosy evening. From far below, over the Great City, came the faint hum of weary millions that had ceased from toil—a drowsy, restful murmur, suggestive of approaching sleep. The sound came gratefully to Istar's ears. Here were no battle-cries, no shouts of attack, no wails of the dying. Beltishazzar surely lied. Nay, over her senses began to steal a sensation of subtle delight, of exquisite content, of freedom from earth-weariness. The hum of the city was gradually replaced by a long-drawn celestial chord, spun out and out with fainter, increasing vibrations, till it died away in the glow of unearthly light that was gradually suffusing the room.

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Istar gave one low cry of love and relief, and, moving from her strained position, lay down upon the soft couch in an attitude of expectancy and happiness. Minute by minute the glow increased in brilliance till the little shrine palpitated with the fires of a midsummer sunset. Vapors of gold, in hot, whirling eddies, floated from ceiling to floor. The objects in the room became indistinguishable, and the light was such as must have struck mortal eyes blind. Gradually, in the meeting-point of the radiating light-streams, there became visible a darkly opaque shape upon which Istar fixed her eyes. It became more and more definable. Suddenly, from the head, there flashed forth five points of diamond light; and at the same instant Allaraine, star-crowned, emerged in mortal semblance from the melting glory. The moon-daughter rose from her couch, and silently the two greeted each other, looking eye into eye with all the companionship of divinity. While they stood thus, Allaraine touched his lyre, and the chords of the night-song of stillness and peace spread through the room and out into the darkness beyond. To mortal senses it was the essence of the summer day, with its fragrance and its passion, hanging still, by early night, over the land and the drowsy city. But to immortal ears it was as the voice of God. Istar drank it in as a thirsty field receives the rivulets of irrigation. And, little by little, as the spell was woven to its close, the star-crowned one drew her towards the throne, on which he caused her to sit, himself floating at a little distance.

"Allaraine! Allaraine! You bring again the breath of space, my home!"

"Yea, Istar!"

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"And a half-mortal sadness looks upon me from your incarnate eyes."

"Beloved of the skies, I am troubled—troubled for you. It is as a messenger knowing little that I come to you from the great throne."

"What message? What message?"

"This: 'As immortal men are yet mortal, so shalt thou be. And by means of pain, of sin, of death, and of love, shalt thou in the end know mankind through thyself; and for thee will there be freedom of choice.'"

Measuredly, clearly, but unintelligently, Allaraine pronounced the words that were to him a mystery; and Istar listened, wondering, a dim foreboding at her heart. After a long pause she spoke mechanically the two words:

"*Mortal! I!*"

"Mortal. Thou. Istar, the heavens mourn!"

"And why, Allaraine?"

"To see thee in pain, in sin, in death—"

Istar raised her hand. "Have peace! These are in the world, but they are not all. There is something besides, that I have seen, yet that neither I, nor thou, nor any of our kind can understand. Sweeter than all the rest are hard, higher than sin is low, more joyful than death is

sad, love reigns over men. Love is from the central fire of God, as we are but its outer rays. Love walks through all the earth, passing to and fro among men, making them to forswear sin, to forget suffering, to overcome death. Those that love are happy in spite of all things. This much have I learned on earth. And if mortality is decreed for me, I shall find love with the rest. Fear not for me, for willingly I bow down in acceptance of suffering, of pain, of wandering in the maze of ignorance, for the sake of this thing that men know and that I cannot understand."

"And thou wilt gladly forget us?"

"Nay, Allaraine. In the long nights and troubled days, thou, as ever, wilt bring me comfort."

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"Ah, Istar—that may not be."

"May not? I shall lose the music—the communion—"

"All things divine will be lost. You enter into the wilderness of the world."

Istar bent her head and was silent. She who had seemed to understand so much, realized nothing. At last, lifting her head heavily, she asked: "When does it come, this farewell to—my home?"

"Not until you, of your own will, renounce divinity."

"Not till I seek it? Nay, this very night I asked it of the Almighty."

"Yea, and the cry was heard. Mortality shall be yours whenever of your own free will you renounce us all for that which mortality will give."

"Ah, then—then, immortal one—I shall remain the Narahmouna."^[7]

Allaraine shook his head thoughtfully and said: "Of that I do not know. I have brought the message. Sleep, celestial woman. I go."

Obediently Istar lay down upon her couch, and the white eyelids closed over the unfathomable eyes. Allaraine, standing over her, looking down upon her mortal form with infinite pity, infinite ignorance, lifted up his lyre once more, and, by the magic of his power, Istar's spirit quickly fled to the land of dreams. There Allaraine left her to await the dawn of the new day, with its monotonous, wearying duties, and its weight of dim, indefinable foreboding, that as yet was all of the earth-life of Narahmouna the divine.

III

A BABYLONISH HOUSEHOLD

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Babylon, the largest, richest, and most powerful city in the world, and of Oriental cities probably the most beautiful, presented, to the discerning eye, not a few glaring incongruities. Though its population had always been large, and was at the present time greater than ever before or after, the actual area of the city was, nevertheless, much too great for the number of people that dwelt in it. There have been kingdoms of fewer acres than those over which the monster city spread. Between the two walls, Imgur and Nimitti-Bel, were grain-fields of sufficient extent to supply the entire population with sesame, barley, and wheat in the event of a prolonged siege. This part of Babylon, therefore, called city by courtesy, was really more in the nature of farm-lands than anything else. While within the inner wall, indeed almost in the heart of the city, were many bare and unsightly acres, used for nothing better than dumping-grounds, or for encampments of the troops of dogs that wandered freely through the streets as scavengers. In some quarters, however, and especially along the banks of the five canals cut from the Euphrates, and winding out towards Borsip on the west and Cutha on the east, every available inch of soil was occupied. Houses jutted over the streets and were crowded together, side by side and back to back, without any attempt at system: tenement districts such as the worst cities of later times never dreamed of. Here the three-story, flat-roofed buildings would be rented out, room by room, to as many people as poverty obliged to live in them. And these were myriad. For as Babylon was the wealthiest of cities, so she concealed in her depths nests of filthy, swarming life, of suffering and of privation such as only human beings could see and still tolerate.

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On the edge of one of these districts, between the square of Nisân and the square of the gods, on the north bank of the canal of the New Year, in two tiny rooms, with a little space also on the roof, lived the widow Beltani, her daughters, and their male slave. The slave was Beltani's sole inheritance from her husband. He was her luxury, her delight, the outlet of her not unfrequent tempers, and one of the three sources of a very limited income. Her daughters were the other two means of livelihood, but to them—though as girls go they were pretty—she was indifferent. Beltani herself was not, like so many of the Babylonish women, in trade. She did the work of the household; cooked—what there was to cook; washed—also what there was to wash; kept the rooms clean, as was consistent with tradition; and, hardest of hard tasks, managed the general income so that, in the two years of their unprotected life, none of the four had starved outright, and none of them had gone naked, while the rent was also paid as regularly as it could not be avoided. Besides this, Beltani held the patronage of two of the great gods; and by their help, together with frequent incantations, had kept the devils of the under-world from inflicting upon

her any particularly direful misfortune. Images of the god Sin, of Bel-Marduk, and of the demons of Headache and the West Wind, were the only ornaments of her rooms. Each of these, however, had its shrine, and was regularly addressed three times a day; and it is to be hoped that if any demon had a due sense of proportion, he would refrain from inflicting any further ill of life upon these poor and pious creatures.

Neither chair nor rug had Beltani. Four pallets, such as they were, three in an inner room, one in a corner of the living-room; a wooden movable table and a brick stationary one; some vessels of clay, two iron pots, three knives, and a two-pronged fork, together with an iron brazier that was kept upon the roof, and lastly, three or four rough, wooden stools, formed the furniture of the house. Nevertheless laughter, and that from very pretty throats, was a thing not unheard in this poverty-stricken place; and as many human sensations, from joy of life to pain of death, had run their course in these rooms as in the magnificent abode of Lord Ribâta Bit-Shumukin, just across the canal.

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At sunset on the day of the great sacrifice to Nebo and Nergal, Beltani stood in the door-way of her living-room, watching the gory light burn over the city, and, fist on hip, shouting gossip to neighbor Noubta of the next tenement.

"Have you been on the Â-Ibur to-day, Beltani?" called the Bee, when one of their intimates had been pretty well demolished at that distance.

"No. Few enough holidays are mine to take. From morning to night the girls run about the city, and some one must be at home to manage."

"Ay, there's your slave. What good is he if he can't take the rooms in charge once in a month? We have no slave, and my man's at work on the reservoir all day; but I slipped out this morning and went off to see the sights. Such crowds! All the city was out. I've a rent in my fresh tunic."

"Well, I couldn't go. One's slave may do much, but he isn't to be trusted with everything. Bazuzu, is the sesame ground?" This last ostentatiously; for Noubta was busily pounding her own barley.

Bazuzu made some reply from within, and after a moment came out of the room, bowl in hand. Jet-black, high-shouldered, and slightly lame, for all that as powerful as an ox was Bazuzu. His appearance was startlingly uncouth as he limped out in answer to Beltani's question. But a gentler light never shone from mortal eyes than from his; and a gentler nature never lurked in so ugly a body.

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Beltani took the bowl from his hand, and, calling a good-night to her neighbor, proceeded leisurely to the stair-way that ran up the outside of the building to the roof. It was on the roof that every family in the tenement did its cooking, except, indeed, in the rainy season. In all these districts the roof was the one luxury, the one comfortable, light, shaded spot, cool and airy in the summer evenings, protected through the day by an awning hung each morning and taken down at sunset. Roof-space was portioned off to tenants according to the number of their rooms; and up here, for them, life was sometimes really worth the living.

While Beltani was up-stairs beginning the preparations for supper, Bazuzu remained in the door-way, shading his eyes from the light of the west, and looking with some interest out towards the canal. Noubta the Bee, still pounding barley, looked also, and presently called to him:

"Baba is coming, there, with the goat, Bazuzu."

And Baba presently appeared. She walked slowly, with a limp, for her feet were sore and inflamed from contact with the burning pavements. Beside her the silky goat, Zor, trotted along with gentle friendliness. Over her left shoulder hung a long string of pine-cones, gathered in a grove by the river and brought home for firewood. As she reached the door-way the slave took these from her and carried them up to Beltani. Baba, meantime, entered the house, passed into the second room, where she, her mother, and sister slept, and threw herself wearily down upon her bed. She lay here quite still, eyes wide open, one thin, brown fist thrown above her head, the other hand on her breast, an expression of intense, never-ending weariness upon her peaked little face. Over her, lying thus as usual after the long day of wandering, Zor stood, looking at her with half-human disturbance. Presently she ran her tongue sympathetically over Baba's hand, and then, with a goat-sigh, settled down on the floor beside her, her white, silken coat close to Baba's coarse, cotton garment. It was a peaceful half-hour that they spent before Bazuzu came to relieve Zor of her burden of milk. Then Baba opened her eyes, realizing that it approached supper-time. Rising with an effort, she passed into the other room to wash at the big, open jar of water standing there. Her head, arms, and hair were just dripping refreshingly, when there came an incursion from without. First arrived Beltani, flushed with astonishment and anger; after her followed Ramûa, in company with a golden-haired youth bearing a silver lyre. At sight of him Baba gave a spasmodic gurgle of amazement, and then stood wet and staring, while her sister gave an explanation of the coming of Charmides.

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"Istar hath bidden it, O my mother," she said, pleadingly, while Beltani still glared. "He is come from over the desert. He is weary, and he is poor."

This last explanation was the worst mistake that Ramûa could have made. "Poor!" burst forth Beltani, angrily. "*Poor!* And is it thy thought that our wealth is so great that we must house here another one—we who have not the wherewithal to exist except in misery? Why is the great goddess wroth with us? Wherein have I offended her, that she sends me another mouth to feed?"

What can he do, this pale-eyed, white-headed thing? Who is he that you bring him home with you? What have you done, Ramûa? How speak you to men that you do not know—men of his class? I will—"

She suddenly stopped; for Charmides' "pale" eyes were fastened on her intently, as if he would have read her words from her expression. And indeed, if this was his idea, the success of it was unique. For when the gaze that caused Beltani to stop speaking, Baba to shake with cold, confusion, and hysterical laughter, and Ramûa to turn fiery red with shame, had lasted as long as Beltani could endure it, Charmides, with business-like precision, brought forth his money-bag, drew therefrom a piece of silver, and quietly proffered it to the mistress of the house.

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Beltani accepted the money without the grace of an instant's hesitation. Moreover, she advanced into the light, where she could examine it more closely to make sure that it was good. "It is not our money. Has it any value?" she asked, looking squarely at the Greek.

Baba went white, Ramûa blushed crimson, and only Charmides kept his countenance unchanged. It was to Ramûa that he looked, this time, for some guidance as to Beltani's meaning; and, looking at her, he presently forgot to wonder why the old woman still held his leafy coin suspiciously up in the light, after a moment repeating, sharply:

"Is the money of real silver, I say?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried Baba, disrespectfully. "This very morning I changed one of them for twenty *se*."

"*You* changed one?" asked Ramûa, wonderingly. "How?"

"He bought of me a cup of Zor's milk this morning as we stood near the square of the gods in the *Â-Ibur*."

Ramûa laughed merrily. "Then it was your *se* that he paid me for bread and dates at noon."

"He pays, then?" queried Beltani.

Ramûa had begun her reply when, to the surprise of all three of them, Charmides himself, who at last had understood a whole phrase, and thus grasped the situation, came out with a stammering and broken, "I pay." And forthwith he took from his bag another piece of silver and held it out to Beltani, who received it shamelessly, while both girls, indignant and helpless, looked on. Fortunately, at this juncture, Bazuzu came down-stairs to say that the sesame boiled, the dates were cooled, and the jar of beer had been set out on the roof.

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Baba returned to her neglected toilet; while Beltani, turning to Ramûa with a very agreeable "Bring the stranger up-stairs," departed in haste to see that enough had been cooked to include Charmides in the meal, and yet leave something for Bazuzu afterwards.

Ramûa waited till Baba had retired to the sleeping-room to bind up her hair; and then, rather apologetically, indicated to Charmides the water-jar. He proceeded, not without a little qualm of distaste, to plunge his head and arms into the same water used ten minutes before by Baba. How Ramûa managed Charmides never learned; for, while he shook the water from his hair, and wiped his face and hands with a garment of his own taken from his bundle, his companion followed her sister to the inner room, from which they presently emerged together, glowing, demure, smooth-haired, and ragged only as to tunics. The three together then mounted the brick staircase in the deepening twilight, to find the whole tenement on the roof at supper.

Beltani, who had waited impatiently for their appearance, was shouting across to a friend certain pieces of information in a way that terrified Ramûa. Charmides might again display that unlooked-for comprehension; and if he did!—Ramûa flushed in the semi-darkness. But the rhapsode, though he did not understand one word in twenty of those that were spoken about him, had already formed a very fair opinion of Ramûa's mother; and nothing that she could have said would much have amazed him. But, disagreeable as she was, he felt that more than she might be endured for the sake of sitting, at each meal, so close to that delightful bit of humanity, Ramûa. As to Baba, with her big eyes and pinched face, and the wonderfully beautiful little body concealed by her hopelessly insolvent garments, she meant nothing to him now, one way or the other. It was all Ramûa—Ramûa, who, with her pretty, quiet helpfulness, her modesty, and also, in no small measure, her very apparent satisfaction in his presence, made the impressionable Sicilian at home in Babylon.

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Before supper was begun Bazuzu came up to the roof again, bearing in his hand a lighted dish-lamp. Chaldean twilights were very short. Day and night were too fond to be kept at arm's-length, and almost before a sunset had time to reach the height of its glory, gray shadows, the loving arms of darkness, were encircling the glow, and presently—lo!—from the east a string of stars was shining forth, and day had fallen to the night's caress.

The hour of the meal was as a dream to Charmides; a dream so vivid that, long years after, when he approached old age, he found himself able to recall with ease every look, every gesture, every shadow that passed before his eyes. The taste of boiled sesame and garlic never failed to bring back the impression of this meal; and time came to be when the master-singer, of his own accord, would go forth to purchase the coarse food that should conjure up again before him Beltani's masculine face watching him out of the shadows; Baba's big eyes fixed unwinkingly upon him; the ungainly figure of Bazuzu, standing in the background beside Zor, the goat; lastly, delight of all

delights, Ramûa again beside him, at his shoulder, her head turned just a little away, her eyes refusing, out of shyness, to meet his, her pure profile all that was to be seen of her face, a little of her smooth shoulder just visible through a sudden rent in the tunic. And at this point Charmides would cover his eyes with his hands to hold the memory, and laugh a little out of pure joy that it had all been so.

At the time of its happening, however, one could not have called Charmides joyful. He was weary, he was hungry, he was conscious that the object of his journey had been fulfilled, and that, now that all was done, his home was at a measureless distance, and there seemed no immediate prospect of returning to it. Onion-flavored grain, eaten with an awkward wooden spoon out of the same dish from which three others were also eating, might be poetic to think of, but was not delightful in actuality. To eat with Ramûa—well and good in its way; with Beltani, however—no! and as for Baba, he regarded her already with displeasure. Her eyes were too big and her body too meagre.

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There was not much conversation at supper. The uncertainty as to the actual powers of Charmides in the way of understanding the Babylonish tongue was dampening to the general spirit. Beltani could only dream of the morrow, when she should have an hour's rest, at any cost, for chatter with Noubta; at which time the estate and importance of the fair-haired one would be definitely settled. Meantime supper must be got over as rapidly as possible. The sesame duly finished, what remained in the dish was handed over to Bazuzu; and bread, dates, and cheese being portioned out, the women rose from their stiff postures and took up less constrained positions in various spots on the roof. Ramûa carried her fruit over to the edge of the roof and sat there in the starlight, her feet hanging over the unrailed edge, munching comfortably. Charmides finished his second course where he sat at table. Baba had thrown herself down by Zor, who was eating a hearty supper of refuse; and Beltani went to the other end of the roof to visit a friend. Now the Greek, scenting an opportunity, finished his dates, and darted down the stair-way, to return after a few minutes' search in the darkness with his lyre. Ramûa did not notice his return, for she had not seen him go. But Baba's little hand tightened on Zor's silken hair, when she felt that he had come back to the roof. Without moving or making any sound, without even a change in expression, she saw him hesitate for the fraction of a second, and then pass quietly over and seat himself at Ramûa's side.

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Charmides was disappointed, perhaps, that the maiden made no sign of satisfaction at his coming. She sat staring up into the high, star-spangled heavens, oblivious, apparently, of everything below them. He also remained silent, looking off towards the dark canal that wound, black and smooth, between the high buildings jutting over it on either side. After all, Babylon, the city of which he had dreamed so long, held nothing that was strange to him. It had been so long his heart-home that he loved it now. As he thought of all that he had done for the sake of being within its giant walls, and as he reflected upon the success of his great purpose, he forgot Ramûa beside him. He had not come for her. She was only a part of the city, the city that he had discovered out of the mighty west. How far above him he had thought all Babylon must be! Yet here it was, at his right hand; and he might touch it where he would, it would welcome him.

Pleased with his thoughts, Charmides ran his fingers over the silver strings of his lyre; and, because he was accustomed to express his emotions in that way, he lifted up his voice and sang, in a gentle tone, some rippling Grecian verses in a melody so delightful that Ramûa turned to marvel, and little Baba laid her head down upon Zor's warm coat in rapturous delight.

Presently, however, Charmides stopped short. Beltani, drawn by the sound of his voice, returned to her corner of the roof, and in the darkness stumbled over Baba's prostrate body. There was a harshly angry exclamation, a sharp blow, a stifled cry of distress, and then her mother was at Ramûa's side, commanding her down-stairs. The girl obeyed without protest, and Charmides followed her, distressed and helpless. In the rooms below, a torch and a lamp gave forth a dim and greasy light. In the first room, against the wall, sat Bazuzu, who had just finished arranging a bed for the stranger. It was but a heap of rags and mats, covered over with a torn rug; and Charmides was soon made to understand that upon this he was expected to pass the night.

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The whole room was utterly uninviting. However, he was tired enough genuinely to welcome the thought of rest, and he looked for the women to retreat to their own room at once. He soon discovered, however, that there was no hope of their immediate retirement. Baba, having driven her goat into its corner, where it obediently lay down, went back to the door-way and stood looking out upon the night. Ramûa was busy making a little fire on the brick table, out of two pine-cones. Beltani held a bit of wood, which she was laboriously shaping with a knife into a crude imitation of a human figure. Charmides watched her with no little curiosity. Her whittling finished, she carefully gathered up all the shavings and threw them into the fire. Then, with a word, she summoned Baba and Bazuzu to her side, and, with an imperious gesture, brought the Greek also into the circle around the little fire. Very solemnly she placed in the centre of the flame the wooden image that she had carved; and, while the fire caught it up, the four Babylonians lifted their voices dolefully, in the old Accadian incantation against demons:

"O witch, whosoever thou art, whose heart conceiveth my misfortune, whose tongue uttereth spells against me, whose lips poison me, and in whose footsteps death standeth, I ban thy mouth, I ban thy tongue, I ban thy glittering eyes, I ban thy swift feet, I ban thy toiling knees, I ban thy laden hands, I ban thy hands behind. And may the moon-god, our god, destroy thy body; and may he cast thee abroad into the lake of water and of fire. Amanû."

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This prayer, of which Charmides understood not a word, but the import of which he pretty clearly

guessed, was the regular conclusion of the day. No Babylonian of the lower class could have passed the night in peace having omitted this exorcism. When it was over Bazuzu filled a dish with the ashes and carried it outside the door, setting it just over the threshold, where no thing of evil could enter the house without passing it. This done, Beltani, with a gesture of good-night to the stranger, retreated into her bedroom, with Baba on the one side of her and Ramûa on the other.

Now at last Charmides was free to rest. Bazuzu, of course, was in the room; but he, having extinguished the lamp, and making signs that when Charmides was ready to sleep he should put out the torch, laid himself down upon his pallet, and, turning his face to the wall, fell soundly asleep. Charmides did not follow immediately. In the flickering light he knelt down and prayed to his lord, Apollo of the Silver Bow, rendering thanks for the safe accomplishment of his journey, and acknowledging the god-head of Istar, whom, in his heart, he regarded as Artemis incarnate.

His devotions over, he rose, extinguished the torch, and felt his way to the bed. He sank upon it with a sensation of delight. His weary limbs relaxed, and for a moment his head swam with the relief of the reclining position. Nevertheless, it was some time before he slept. Through the open door-way the cool, sweet breath of the summer night stole in upon him. In the square, black patch of sky visible where he lay came two or three stars: the same stars that had looked on him in Sicily. A sudden spasm of longing and of fear—fear of his strangeness, his helplessness in this vast city, came over him then. From out of the night he heard his mother's voice calling him from the shore of the sea; and he answered her with a moan. For a little time her form stood out before his eyes, clear and luminous against the black background. Then, gradually, the blinding rays of Istar's aureole replaced her, and Istar herself was before him, in all her surpassing beauty. After a time she flashed out of his sight, but not before the thought had come to him, unsummoned, that he had not yet finished with Istar of Babylon in her city; that she, the great, the unapproachable goddess, would need him at some future time to succor her. He smiled at the idea, thinking it a dream. And with the thought of dreams he entered the land of them, nor came forth again till morning dawned.

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The night wore along, and there came to be but one sleeper in the room. Black Bazuzu was awake, sitting—no, standing up. He moved noiselessly to the door-way, and picked up there one of the baskets of his own making. With this he crossed the threshold of the door, stepping carefully over the witch's plate, and presently disappeared into the blackness beyond. An hour later he came quietly in again, put his basket into its place, and stopped to listen carefully to the sound of his companion's breathing. It had not changed. With a satisfied nod the slave returned to his couch, laid him gladly down, and slept.

Sunlight streaming over his face, the sound of a quick exclamation, and a little ripple of laughter, brought the Greek to his senses next morning. Ramûa, bright-eyed and smiling, sat in the door-way, a heap of fresh and dewy flowers in her lap, a basket-tray beside her. She was fastening up little bouquets of roses, lilies, heliotrope, nasturtiums, iris, narcissi, and the beautiful lotus. Baba, as usual, was playing with Zor, who had just made another rent in her much-tattered garments; and Bazuzu lay upon his pallet, still asleep. Presumably Beltani was on the roof. Charmides hoped so. He had already come to prefer her at a distance. But at present the rather unusual arrangements of this household puzzled him; and he could not tell, from precedent, where any of its members would ordinarily be at this hour.

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Charmides rose, not a little embarrassed at having been asleep in the presence of Ramûa and her sister. He became in time accustomed to the very free manners current among Babylonians of the lower class; but at present he was mightily relieved when Ramûa, with a tact hardly to be hoped for, jumped up from her place, and, calling to Baba to follow her, departed towards the roof with her fragrant burden. Charmides at once began his toilet, which he happily finished without interruption. Then, leaving Bazuzu still asleep, he sought his hosts in the upper air. Breakfast was ready, and it proved to be a gala meal. There was meat—goat's flesh from the yesterday's sacrifice. For on days that followed great religious festivals the flesh from the sacrificial hecatombs was sold at a minimum price to the poor, so that the greater part of Babylon had meat to eat. Besides this, there were milk and bread; and Charmides, in a sunny mood, felt that the king himself could have desired nothing more.

The meal was quickly over, and, a few minutes afterwards, Charmides could scarcely have told how, he found himself walking, lyre in hand, at Ramûa's side, along the bank of the canal, on the way to the temple of Istar. On her head Ramûa carried her basket of fresh flowers. The Greek watched her closely and with delight as she moved, lithe, straight, and graceful as a young tiger, her bare feet making delicate marks in the dust of the way, her hair, to-day unbound, swinging behind her in long, silken masses. And Charmides' beauty-loving eyes brought joy to his soul as he regarded her. Yet his walk was not wholly a light-hearted one. His mind was troubled with thinking, as other men thought, as he had not thought before, of a means of livelihood. Here he was, thrown utterly on his own resources. If he would live he must work—must gain enough to keep him, however simply, when his father's money was used up. This conviction was not an easy one to face. There was but one thing that he knew how to do well, and at all times liked to do, and that thing held forth small promise of earning him money. His poor lyre! In any province of Greece, or Lydia, there had been small cause for worry. Rhapsodists were of a class apart, and were revered by an art-loving people as on an equality with their priests. Zeus might be the greatest Olympian; but Apollo had a shrine in every heart. Babylonia, however, was not Greece; and what the Babylonian fancy for music might be, Charmides did not know. Thus when the long walk was ended, and Ramûa had taken her place on the platform steps below the temple of Istar,

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she looked up into his face to find the usually bright countenance as solemn as that of an ibis. Nor could any word or look of hers bring more than the shadow of a smile to his lips.

Charmides stood beside her for a few moments, looking across the thinly peopled square. Then his shoulders straightened. He gave a little outward manifestation of his mental state, looked at Ramûa with a farewell smile, and left her, walking swiftly away towards the Â-Ibur-Sabû.

Ramûa, confounded, cried after him impulsively: "You will return! You will return to me at noon?"

Charmides looked round, nodding reassuringly, but whether in response to her words or merely in answer to her voice, the maiden could not tell. She sat quite still where he had left her, her head drooping a little, utterly forgetful of her business, paying not the least attention to possible buyers. The sun poured its bright, scorching heat down upon the gray bricks. Water-sellers were to be heard crying their ever-welcome refreshment. Chariots, carts, and litters passed through the square. The city's voice rose murmuringly through the heat, and one by one the usual beggars and venders made their appearance on the platform steps.

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Through the hours Ramûa sat spiritless, watching those that passed up the temple steps, selling her flowers unsmilingly, half unwillingly, to those that offered to buy. At early noon she felt a first qualm of hunger, and looked up to find the sun at its zenith. With a start she came to herself. It was past her usual luncheon hour. All around her little meals of bread, sesame, and dates were being brought forth by the habitués of the steps. The cripple on Ramûa's left hand, thinking perhaps that she must go hungry to-day, proffered her half of his loaf with a compassionate, misshapen grin. Ramûa refused him with a forced smile, and, heavy-hearted, took out her food and showed it to him. There was enough for two in her package to-day; and she regarded it unhappily, still hesitating to eat, while the hope that Charmides might return died within her. Once again she looked over the deserted square, and then, resolutely turning her face to the temple, took one dry mouthful of bread. Charmides was gone for evermore. She should not see him again. Another bite: Charmides had been killed. A third: his body was floating, face downward, in the black, hurrying waters of the cruel Euphrates. A fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and there appeared a tear, that rolled uncontrollably down her pretty nose. She put her bread away—when before had she not been hungry at noon?—and then sat with her head bent, trying to conceal her grief from the sympathetic beggar.

Presently some one came up the steps and sat down close beside her. She felt the presence, but did not look round. Suddenly a big, ripe melon was placed before her, by a hand too white for Babylon. Ramûa started up, with a spasmodic breath, and her face glowed like the sun after a summer storm. Charmides, the morning trouble all gone from his face, was at her side. In one hand he held a number of ripe figs. The other had borne the melon. Ramûa retired at once within herself, too shy to do more than smile faintly and then try to hide her face, with its unconcealable joy. But such a welcome pleased the Greek more than anything else; for, as he was beginning to realize, his instincts regarding woman nature were quite unexpectedly reliable.

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Luncheon was now eaten in earnest; and the cripple could not but be amazed at the change in Ramûa's appetite. With a little laugh she broke the melon on the steps, and proffered a large piece of it, together with his bread and dates, to the Greek. She herself ate slowly but willingly, answering the looks of the rhapsode, and even talking to him in the tongue that he could not understand.

There came a time, however, after the last fig was gone and the cup of water had been bought and drunk, when embarrassment fell between the two. Ramûa feared, dreaded, and then half hoped that Charmides would rise and go away again, this time to stay. She felt that she could make no effort to keep him at her side. She would have given half her life to be able to treat him with natural gayety; and yet, had she been able to do so, the essence of delight in all this would be gone. Charmides himself was suffering from the inability to talk to her. But after an unbearable period of awkward silence he strove to solve their difficulty. Leaning over from where he sat, and touching the girl's tunic, he said to her, by means of signs and looks, and a word or two:

"What is the name of this?"

Ramûa smiled with delight. "*Kadesh*" she replied; and in this way Charmides' course of study was begun. The first lesson lasted for an hour, and at the end of it the Greek knew not a few words that promised to stick in his memory. When he felt that he could retain no more, he stopped her, and sat conning his lesson on the steps in the sunshine, while she, tardily recalled to duty, took her flower-basket and went forth into the square to proffer her somewhat drooping bouquets to the passers-by. By the time she returned to her companion the sun was midway down the heavens, and Charmides, lyre in hand, stood, evidently waiting for her. By means of signs he made her understand that he must leave her till after sunset, when he would return again to the square to go home with her.

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Ramûa did not ask his destination. Very probably he could not have made her understand it had she done so. She watched him pass down a narrow street that led to the southwest, out of the square of Istar, in the direction of the temple of Sin. It was to the holy house of the moon-god that Charmides went; for his single morning in Babylon had found him a means of livelihood.

Though he himself was unaware of the exact position that he held, he was attached to the temple as an oracle. That morning, as he had hummed himself through the square of Sin, one of the Zicarû, or monks in service at the temple, had chanced to hear his voice, and, perceiving that the

singer was of foreign race, and being himself a highly educated man, as were all of his order, addressed the fair-haired one in the westernmost language that he knew—Phœnician. Charmides had come near to falling at his feet and worshipping in the delight of finding some one to speak to. But the Zicari led him gravely into one of the inner rooms of the temple and there asked him sing and speak and play upon his instrument, and after a time made him an offer to join the temple service, unordered as he was, and to do exactly what he was told for about three hours in the day. The pay was high, and to Charmides it seemed that a miracle of fortune had befallen him. Such being the case, it was, perhaps, just as well that he did not understand the full significance of his duties. For an hour in the morning he was to stand inside of the heroic statue of the god, and to speak through the half-open mouth words whispered in his ear by an attendant priest. He was not told that his peculiar pronunciation of the Babylonian syllables and the melodious softness of his voice were invaluable adjuncts to the oracle of Sin; and that, furthermore, the fact that he understood not a word of what he said made him more desirable for the place than any member of the under-priesthood would have been. Besides this curious work, he was supposed to assist at sacrifices by playing on the flute or lyre; and by means of these light duties his livelihood became an assured thing, and his place in Babylon was secure. He asked no questions, either of himself or of the priest, his master. He accepted everything with childlike faith; and, verily, it seemed that, brush as he would against the world, the bloom of his pristine innocence would never be rubbed from Charmides' unstained soul.

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So, having found a home and an occupation, within forty-eight hours after his arrival in the Great City, Charmides' life in Babylon began.

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Charmides found no loneliness in his Babylonish life. In an unaccountable way he felt it to be the home of his spirit. The dirty, narrow, barely furnished rooms of the tenement of Ut; the vast temple of Sin, where he performed the light tasks that gave him his livelihood; the platform of the temple of the goddess, where, with Ramûa close at hand, the hours were wont to fly on rosy wings; the long streets, the myriads of people, the hum of the city, the curious, solemn, ceremonious bearing of its inhabitants, all these welded themselves into such a life that sometimes, in dead of night, he cried out in the fear that it was all a dream: a dream from which he could only pray not to wake.

In the second week there happened something that gave him a great thrill of exalted pride. It was eight days after his arrival; in fact, the noon after the third Sabbatû of the month of Duzu (June). He was sitting with Ramûa on the steps of the temple of Istar, munching dates and struggling with new phrases in the apparently hopeless Chaldean tongue, when a veiled hierodule came out of the temple and down the platform stairs with the request that Charmides follow her to the presence of Belit Istar, who longed for the sound of his voice.

The Greek felt a quiver, half of fear, half of delight; and, rising at once, and leaving Ramûa and his meal behind, followed the attendant, not into the temple, but behind it, towards the entrance court of Istar's dwelling. Here, upon a heap of rugs, beneath a canopy of Egyptian embroidery, the goddess reclined. Charmides, however, did not see her till after he had encountered the gaze of one who stood just inside the arch of the door in the wall. This was he who had followed Istar in his chariot home from the procession of the gods, he at whose remarkable appearance Charmides had so marvelled: Belshazzar, the king's son. Still was he godlike, imperial enough to look upon; but the Greek forgot his presence while Istar was again before him. When his gaze fell on her he started slightly, turned his eyes away for an instant, and looked again. Yes—it was true. Through the shimmering veil her form was clearly visible. She was not now only a cloud of dazzling, palpitating light. Immortal still, and radiant she was, but—Charmides let his thoughts break off quickly. Istar was commanding him, in Greek, to play to her. He lifted his lyre at once, and, under the spell of music, he forgot himself, half forgot her before whom he played, in contemplation of the ideal created by the harmonies. When, after half an hour, he was stopped and dismissed, he left the divine presence in a state of exaltation. Belshazzar was but a blur beside the door-way, and Ramûa, when he returned to her, seemed a trifle less beautiful than usual.

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After this, every day, Charmides gave half of his noon hour to this new form of worship. It was Ramûa's pride as well as his. She never grudged the time; and, on his return to her side, never failed to ask of his success, nor to beam with delight when he confessed it. At each of these visits Charmides realized that Belshazzar was present; but the fact made little impression on him. He saw her whom he worshipped quicken to new life, to new radiance, at sound of his voice and the chords of his lyre; and, when he left the court, the storm in the eyes of the king's son went unnoticed. Yet the storm was there, daily increasing in fury; and there came a time when it passed control and burst forth in the very presence of her whom both men worshipped.

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It was noon on the seventh of Abû (July), a day on which Babylon lay quivering under a fiercer sun than before. The city was exhausted with the recent end of the annual three-day feast of Tammuz; and Charmides himself was weary and a little faint when he entered Istar's presence. Belshazzar, with what seemed a scarce pardonable liberty, had thrown himself face downward on

a rug near the portal of the court. At the first note of Charmides' song a slight twitching of the muscles in the prince's back betrayed his hearing of the song. But as the voice went on, as Charmides, even in his weariness, sang with a depth of feeling that he had never before exhibited, the other man lifted his head to look at Istar. Under the spell of the music that was a divine gift, she was becoming more and more the old-time unapproachable goddess. The rays of the aureole, which, half an hour before, had vibrated so slowly as scarcely to disturb the eye, were quickened to a new life. Blinding streams of light poured about her now. And Istar herself was quivering with a strength, with a delight, that was apart from earthly things. Charmides' voice showed its power, its beauty, its clear heights, its mellow depths, as never before. He had begun with a most delicate pianissimo, in tones of exquisite restraint and purity, the old myth of Alpheus and Arethuse—a thing that he had sung a hundred times before, yet never as now. The tones blended with the rippling harmonies of his lyre in a stream as pure and limpid as the current of the sacred river. The Greek syllables, music in themselves, fitted so perfectly to the melody, that Allaraine himself, afar off, listened with surprise and pleasure. Belshazzar alone, perceiving how Istar's divinity increased with each sweep of the instrument, trembled with anger. The song rose towards its climax. Istar had become oblivious to everything but the sound of that voice. Charmides, inspired, had lost himself in the heaven of his own making. Suddenly, from beside him, came a hoarse, choked cry, the sound of hurried running, and the lyre was struck furiously from his hands down to the brick pavement.

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"Ὡς εἰπὼν Ἀλφείυς μὲν...!" The song stopped. Panting with broken emotion, Charmides faced about. His face was pale and his lips drawn with displeasure—with something more than that. Before him, shaking with jealous wrath, towered Belshazzar, his hand uplifted, his eyes flaming.

There was silence. Charmides waited immovably for the blow to fall. But Belshazzar did not strike him. Istar lay back, trembling. Under the influence of these human and gross emotions, the vibrations of light around her diminished so rapidly that one could see them melt away; and soon she was left almost without divine protection—a woman, in woman's garb. Finally, however, with no trace of weakness in her manner, she rose, confronting the two men. For a moment her gaze travelled from one to the other. Then, passing to Charmides, she halted by his side, touched his shoulder lightly with her hand, and pointed to the door-way.

"Go, thou disciple of Apollo. Fear not. I will send to thee a lyre that is not dishonored. To-morrow come to me again—as always."

Then, while the Greek still quivered with the thrill of her touch, she walked with him, two or three steps, towards the open arch.

In the mean time Belshazzar, broken now, waited before her place. When the light trailing of her garments passed near his feet again, he suddenly lifted his head and looked at her. They were face to face, and their eyes met. Istar's glance shone clear and baffling upon the man, yet before it Belshazzar would not lower his. He was making an almost inhuman effort, mental and physical, to overcome the perfect poise that proclaimed her more than human. But Belshazzar could not cope with a thing divine. His strength, to the last drop, was gone. She was superior to him. He knew it. Goddess she was—must be! He must acknowledge it—must submit. Slowly he lifted his arms and crossed them on his breast. Slowly his dark head was lowered. With bitter humiliation he gave the signal of defeat. Istar moved slightly.

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"Give me the broken lyre," she said, softly.

Belshazzar sought it where it lay, bright and shattered on the pavement. He proffered it to her humbly, and saw her, receiving it, touch it to her breast. He shut his eyes that he might not see the hated thing made whole; but, looking up again, he saw the instrument still splintered, still unstrung. She had not, then, performed the miracle.

He had but a moment more with her. Presently she raised her hand, and, with the slightest of gestures, dismissed him from her presence. Belshazzar could not disobey the command. Blindly, weakly, without a glance behind, he moved towards the portal. Thus he did not see the goddess, as he left the court, suddenly reel, and an instant afterwards fall back upon the pile of rugs, covering her face with her hands, and exhibiting every sign of human distress. On the contrary, humiliated, hopeless, and disturbed by the temerity of his thoughts, yet as rebellious as before, the prince of Babylon crossed the platform and descended the steps where Charmides sat with Ramûa. The prince scarcely saw the Greek as he passed him; and Charmides only lifted his eyes in time to behold Belshazzar's back, and to watch him cross the square to the spot where his chariot waited. The driver, at his master's approach, leaped to his place, drawing up the heads of the powerful black animals. The prince entered the vehicle. Nebo-Ailû gave a quavering cry. The horses plunged forward, and the shining chariot clattered after them down the Â-Ibur-Sabû.

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"To the house of Amraphel," said Belshazzar; and Nebo-Ailû inclined his head.

They passed swiftly down the great street to where, north of the square of the gods and the holy houses of Nebo and Nergal, stood the spacious palace of Amraphel, high-priest of Bel-Marduk, and chief of the priesthood of Babylon.

As the chariot of the prince royal drew up before the palace gate, two attendants always in waiting there ran out, their swords held horizontally above their heads, in presentation to one high in authority. Belshazzar remained like a statue where he stood, and Nebo-Ailû requested audience with the high-priest in such terms as the prince would have used towards an equal; for the priest of Bel-Marduk was not at the command of the king.

The slaves disappeared with their message, and Belshazzar waited, motionless, moving not so much as an eyelash, acknowledging no obeisance made him by a passer-by: for such was the etiquette of royalty at that day. After many minutes in this trying attitude, a little company of eunuchs emerged from the gateway. In their midst, shaded by a large, swinging parasol, and fanned on either side by black slaves, was Amraphel, an old man, white-bearded, bright-eyed, his stiff, white hair crowned with a red, conical cap, his flowing muslin skirts sweeping the pavement, and the goat-skin bound upon his left shoulder. Slowly he moved towards the chariot. Ten feet from the wheel he stopped. At the same instant Belshazzar turned his head. They gave to each other the brother salute—of the mind, the lips, and the heart. Then Amraphel, who was doing the prince an extraordinary honor, said:

"Will the lord prince, governor of the city, enter into my house?"

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"Receive my thanks for thy favor. Nay, Amraphel, it is Nabu-Nahid, the king, my father, that asks if thou wilt be conducted by me to his presence. He has some communication to make to thee."

"I will command my chariot."

Belshazzar leaped from his place, while Nebo-Ailû descended more carefully and went to stand at the horses' heads. "Let my chariot be yours, Lord Amraphel," observed the prince, courteously.

The old priest bowed acknowledgment, and, having quickly whispered in the ear of his nearest slave: "My chariot at the gate of the new palace within an hour," stepped forward and mounted into the royal vehicle. Belshazzar followed him, and this time took the reins himself, leaving Nebo-Ailû to reach home on foot; for there were few chariots that afforded comfortable standing-room for more than two people.

Nebo-Ailû left the horses' heads just as Belshazzar's ringing cry sent them plunging up the Â-Ibur-Sabû. At no great distance north of the palace of the high-priest there ran off from the boulevard a narrow but well-paved road, that wound eastward and north to that part of the river that was lined with palaces—on the east shore Nebuchadrezzar's and Nabopolassar's, side by side, connected by the great bridge with those on the opposite bank—the hanging gardens, Nabu-Nahid's royal dwelling, and the vast hunting-park used by Belshazzar. The Street of Palaces skirted this park, passed the portals of the present royal palace, and branched off to the west end of the great bridge. Along this way to-day Belshazzar guided his steeds at break-neck pace; for in all Chaldea there was not such another horseman as he, when he chose to exercise his skill; and it must be confessed that there was nothing in the person of Amraphel that made Belshazzar desirous of prolonging their drive together. The priest showed neither nervousness nor displeasure at the pace set. Through all the jolting, the jarring, and the swift, dangerous curves, he maintained an expressionless, passive demeanor. It was only when, with a wide sweep, the vehicle rounded up and the quivering steeds came to a halt before Nabû-Nahid's gateway, that Amraphel, alighting first, remarked, ceremoniously:

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"Thine are goodly horses, Prince Bel-shar-utsur. May Ramân guard them that you break not their breath some day with fast running."

"There are other horses to be bought for gold," was the brusque answer, as Belshazzar leaped from the chariot and signed to a slave to lead the frothing animals to their stables.

Prince and priest entered the palace together; but, once across the outer court-yard, Belshazzar left his companion to be announced before the king, while he himself retreated to his own apartments, where many hours' labor awaited him. Steward and chancellor sat in his council-chamber when he entered it, and he greeted them with the air of a man who was about to begin work. Yet work was impossible to-day to him. Treasury and grain reports, accounts of the crops within the walls, lists of taxes, military supplies, arrangements of reviews, matters of pension and promotion, deeds of sale, mortgages, matters of transport, all alike were impossible to be considered. That thing which was haunting him would not go; and, after half an hour of wearisome effort to concentrate his mind on what was before him, he suddenly pushed away all the clay tablets and rolls of papyrus, leaped to his feet, and, curtly dismissing the officials, himself left the room. Passing out of his many and rather forlorn apartments, he walked aimlessly out across the wide, central court-yard, around which the separate portions of the palace met, and went through a small gateway that led into the seraglio. The small court, off which opened various sets of rooms, was white with the glare of the afternoon sun. Three piles of scarlet rugs, an embroidery frame, and a broken peacock-feather fan, gave evidence of the feminine character of the inhabitants of the court; but there was no woman here at the present moment. Huddled in the shadow of the wall, his bronze back turned upon the world, lay a child of three or four years, fast asleep. Before each of the several door-ways stood a cotton-clad eunuch, palm-staff in hand, rigid and sleepy. These inclined decorously as Belshazzar swept across the court, and they watched him from under their eyelids as he halted near the great entrance, looking thoughtfully around. From some chamber far in the interior came the droning sound of a dulcimer and the crooning of a woman's voice. Other than this, the seraglio was still.

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Belshazzar stood apathetically listening to the song. Should he seek out the singer? After a moment's indecision, and a step or two in the direction of a small door-way, he halted. He had had enough of singing for one day. Yet, till the day was cooler, time must be passed in some way. He might go to his father—his father and Amraphel, who were closeted together. His father and Amraphel—clay and a sculptor; soft metal and a hot fire; an arrow and the bow. Belshazzar caught at his idea, never looked again at the court-yard, but turned sharply on his heel and set off

across the palace for his father's favorite lounging-room. He was met at its curtained door-way by Shâ-Nânâ-Shî, chief eunuch of the king's house, who regarded the advisability of an intrusion by the prince as a matter of doubtful wisdom.

"The priest of Bel is within, Lord Belshazzar."

"Who else?"

"Shûla—"

"The architect?"

"My lord speaks."

"Let me enter, then. Amraphel is dangerous, I say!"

Nânâ, his duty done, stood aside; and Belshazzar, unannounced, strode into his father's place of dreams. [Pg 165]

His entrance brought with it sudden silence. The prince felt this before his hand had dropped the curtain. He looked from the effeminate figure of the king, reclining on a couch, to Amraphel, who stood stiffly on the other side of the room, and then back to little Shûla, with his scrolls of papyrus upon the floor before him, and his expression apprehensive of some unexpected disturbance. Belshazzar, in his one swift glance, read the drama, smiled inwardly, shrugged, and stepped over to Nabonidus' side.

"My coming is ill-timed, lord my father?" he asked, in a gently grieved tone, after the filial obeisance.

"No, Belshazzar, no," replied his father, with hasty courtesy. "I rejoice at your arrival. You may, perhaps, show us the way out of our discussion."

"And of what is it that you speak?"

"The great temple of Ishtar, in Erech, which I, at the behest and for the love of the gods my fathers, have lately restored. Shûla's drawings of the new building are here."

Little Shûla's face betrayed wary signs of enthusiasm. Shûla, alone with his master the king, was an inspiring sight; for the one was no less ardent than the other on their particular hobby. But Shûla with Amraphel on the one hand, Belshazzar on the other, and Nabonidus in the background, was an unhappy object. The high-priest was like a wedge inserted between two teeth; himself unfeeling, impassive, unswerving, he possessed the unhappy faculty of causing everybody about him the most exquisite discomfort by the mere fact of his presence. From behind the drawings that had been presented to him by Shûla, Belshazzar looked about him. The constraint of the atmosphere was still a mystery.

"So," he said, presently, in a tone of slow good-humor, "your discussion is regarding the holy temple of Istar of Erech. And what of this temple?" [Pg 166]

"My Lord Nabu-Nahid, why should this feeble matter in any way concern the prince thy son? Has he not perplexities enough in the ruling of the city—"

"Nay, Amraphel," cut in Belshazzar, hastily, "I am here because of my idleness. Here, if my father says me not nay, I will stay, and listen to your speech. What speak you of?" He turned again to his father, as the high-priest, with an angry frown, gave up the point.

"Yes, yes, Belshazzar, stay and tell Amraphel that the goddess Ishtar must not be removed from Babylon to dwell for evermore in her holy house at Erech."

Belshazzar's head swam; and he felt a pang as of a stab at his heart. The knowledge that Amraphel's hawk-eyes were reading him like a bare tablet, enabled him to straighten up, without having betrayed himself utterly.

"The Lady Istar removed from Babylon?" he repeated.

"Listen, Lord Belshazzar," observed Amraphel, smoothly. "The primeval seat of Belit Ishtar was, as you know, in the ancient city of Erech. It was from there, more than sixty thousand years ago, [8] after the death of Izdubar, that her worship was extended to all Chaldea. Now, on the site of her old and ruined temple, your father has caused to be erected the magnificent building of which the plans lie yonder. The king, out of the goodness of his heart, is about to decree a great religious festival in honor of the goddess and the opening of the temple. At present the rightful inhabitant of that temple is alive in Babylonia. How displeasing to her and to the gods her brothers would it be, if her temple should be opened without her!"

Amraphel finished in a tone of quiet authority that was peculiarly irritating. That his logic, however, was incontrovertible, was at once apparent to Belshazzar. Again, however, Nabonidus began with his plaintive, unreasoning: "No, no. Babylon shall be protected. Babylon must keep her goddess." [Pg 167]

Amraphel shifted his weight and gave the faintest shrug of the shoulders. The sheep-like complaint must run its course. After it, a victory would be a simple matter. But Belshazzar's expression was not that of his father. Amraphel regarded it uneasily. The high-priest's one desire

was to get Istar, goddess or demon, whichever she might be, out of Babylon, where her hold on the credulous and superstitious masses was something against which the priesthood could not contend. And this desirable end might easily have been arranged with Nabonidus alone. Belshazzar's entrance at this particular time was the most unfortunate thing that could have happened. Amraphel had some faint, hardly defined suspicion of Belshazzar's state of mind; and he was instinctively aware that to remove Istar from Belshazzar's seat of government, would be a task next to impossible. Belshazzar, after a few moments of thought, said, quietly:

"My father, Amraphel of Bel is right inasmuch as he saith that Belit Istar should go down into Erech to receive worship in her holy temple. Decree the festival in honor of her and of the great gods her brothers; and let her be in Erech for that time. But as the goddess of Chaldea suffered her first incarnation in Erech, and there dwelt during her first earth-life, so now, since she received the flesh in Babylon, let her also dwell here, returning hither again after the opening of her temple in the ancient city. Is it not reasonable that it should be so, O Amraphel?"

"Truly, truly, Belshazzar, thou art inspired of the gods!" cried Nabonidus, delightedly, from his couch.

Little Shûla ventured to smile; and Amraphel signalized a partial defeat by seating himself in an ivory chair, disdained by him a half-hour before. Belshazzar remained standing. He felt that his point was won. There were, indeed, more words on both sides, but nothing further was gained by the priest. The festival was planned for the following week; and it was decided that Istar, the king, the prince, and many of the priesthood, should descend the river in the state barges kept ready equipped and frequently used by the king and the official household. At Erech itself there would be processions, pageants, sacrifices, and merry-makings of every description. For three days should Istar be installed in her holy house, returning afterwards to Babylon as she had come. To this plan Amraphel was obliged to submit; for if the force of logic pitted against him was as strong as his own, and the strength of will were as great again, it was because Amraphel was laboring through hate, while Belshazzar worked in the thrall of an overweening, hopeless, unconquerable passion that meant more to him than his religion, and against which none could have contended. It was part of their times, probably, that in the midst of the dispute it should not once occur to any of the three that Istar herself could best decide the place of her future dwelling. Goddess though she might be, her gender was feminine; and that fact, in this oldest of Oriental lands, in a way half neutralized her godhead.

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The discussion ended, Nabonidus waited fretfully to be alone; but the high-priest still lingered, and Belshazzar, as Amraphel very well knew, remained for the purpose of watching him and preventing any attempted influence with the king. It was not, indeed, till Nabu-Nahid dismissed Shûla, and, rising, announced that he was going to the apartments of his low-born queen, that Amraphel took an obligatory leave, and Belshazzar, in a very good humor, watched the high-priest drive from the portals of the palace in his own chariot.

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By now the sun hung low in the heavens. The heat of the day was passed; and the prince, dismissing from his mind all further thoughts of work, commanded his chariot again. The victory of the afternoon had almost counterbalanced the hopeless affair of the earlier day; and it was in a careless and light-hearted mood that the prince royal started forth into the city, chatting as he went with Nebo-Ailû, and showing by this means that his business was unofficial.

Their way led once more into the Â-Ibur, down which they rattled past the treasury, the granaries, the house of Amraphel, the square of the gods, and finally across the bridge of the New Year. Here they turned off to drive along the street that ran by the south bank of the canal, till they drew up in front of the palace and extensive gardens that stood almost directly opposite the tenement of Ut. Here, at a bound, Belshazzar alighted, dismissed his chariot, and turned to the resplendent slave who hurried out to meet him.

"Tell Lord Ribâta that Bit-Shamash—nay, lead me rather into his presence without announcement. I can speak for myself."

The servant cringed obediently, and led the way through the empty court-yard into a long series of dimly lighted and sparsely furnished halls, elaborately decorated, but as cold and as lifeless as unused chambers always are. From these they presently emerged into a very livable apartment, where, in a big arm-chair, in front of a narrow table, bending over a heap of neatly inscribed tablets which he was examining with the aid of a magnifying-glass, sat the master of the house, Ribâta Bit-Shumukin, one of the most important and one of the youngest officials in the kingdom. His back was to the door-way, and he was much engrossed in his task. Therefore he had no inkling of the appearance of Belshazzar till it was announced by a burst of hilarious laughter, and the words: "Truly here is an example for thy prince!"

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Bit-Shumukin started up and wheeled round. Belshazzar's laughter seemed to be catching, for Ribâta, at sight of his friend's face, joined in his merriment, and the two laughed together till the solemn secretaries and the slave-porter were constrained to think the heir-apparent either very drunk or very crazy.

"How art th—thou melancholy, O my Ribâta? Is it granaries or Elam that know thy labors at this hour of repose?" gasped Belshazzar, when their mirth had diminished somewhat.

"Granaries, my prince. But if I labor further now, it is thou that shalt be blamed for it."

"Never! Dismiss thy sweating secretaries and send them to their play. Then thou shalt once more

show me Khamma, if thy jealousy hath indeed abated. Let her dance for us to the strains of the zither. Let us quaff wines of Khilbum and of Lebanon. Let us laugh, and make joy to flow about us like rain in Tabitû. Yea! Harken unto me, for I speak as a prophet; I speak as the mighty prophet of my father's father—what was his name? Bel—Bel—"

"Belti-shar-utsur!"

"Belti-shar-utsur! That! Without the *ti* it is mine own. Come away, Ribâta, from this den of toil."

Belshazzar's flow of nonsense ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the last phrase was spoken rather impatiently. Ribâta recognized the change and hastily obeyed his companion's suggestion, dismissing his secretaries, and slipping a familiar arm through that of Belshazzar, as they started away together towards the women's apartments. Here they entered a small, empty hall, at the upper end of which was a raised daïs covered with rugs and cushions, and overhung by a purple canopy. Belshazzar threw himself wearily down, while Ribâta sent for refreshment of cool wines and fruits, for slaves with fans and perfumes, and, finally, for Khamma, the fairest of his dancing-women.

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While he was waiting for these various luxuries, Belshazzar lay back upon the soft resting-place with an air of intense weariness. His evanescent gayety had gone, and he was bent beneath a weight of unknown cares. Ribâta understood him in this state as well as in the other, for the two men were as brothers—Bit-Shumukin having lived all his life under the royal protection. Bit-Shamash and he had played together as children; together had reached the period of adolescence; had tasted the first delights of young manhood, entered upon a career of the wildest dissipation, and finally settled down to take up the duties of life, still in each other's company, still holding fast to a brotherhood of spirit that was perhaps the most beautiful thing in the life of each. Ribâta was in no way possessed of the remarkable personal beauty that had rendered Belshazzar famous—or, some said, infamous, through the land. Still, in his way, he was a handsome fellow, of good stature, cleanly built, with refined features, a merry eye, and the blackest possible hair and beard. His wealth was great and his taste highly cultivated; so that Belshazzar had only to admire whatever he might find in the house of his friend. This, a few weeks past, had been a fact somewhat unfortunate; for a new slave of Bit-Shumukin's purchase, Khamma by name, a dancing-girl of some beauty, had appeared before the prince, and for the moment caught his fancy. The girl herself, being called to him and receiving a word or two and a caress, suddenly fell on her knees before her master, and pleaded with childish tears and sobs to be sold to this man over whose wonderful eyes she was suddenly gone desperate. It had been an embarrassing situation. Belshazzar knew Ribâta to be, for the moment, enamoured of his purchase; and he escaped her adoring presence as adroitly as possible. Yet for days thereafter Khamma had chosen to weaken her eyes with incessant tears, her voice with moans and wails, and, worst of all, her owner's affection by her exhibition of dislike for him. The result was that Ribâta's passion cooled as rapidly as it had risen, and, a day or two before, he had actually offered her to Belshazzar, taking care to warn the prince that, save for her dancing, she was a perfectly useless piece of household furniture. Belshazzar was not too enthusiastic over her, but consented to see her again, and hence his visit to-day. But now, while they waited her coming, his mind was anywhere but upon her.

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Side by side the two men lay back on their cushions. The perfumed air was stirred about them by the huge, slowly moving fans. At their feet stood a bronze pitcher of wine, and in their hands were chased silver cups. After a sleepy pause the prince, taking a long draught, introduced an unlooked-for topic.

"Beltishazzar, Ribâta, the prophet of Nebuchadrezzar—he was one of the captives of Judea, I have heard."

"Ay. He is a Jew."

"*Is!*"

"It is so. He lives, I know too well where. Thou, also, must have seen him many times. His dwelling is in the Jews' quarter, not far from the traders' square, and close to the house of Êgibi. In time, my lord prince, upon some council day, I shall speak to thee concerning the race of this Beltishazzar. For the last two years I have watched them, and I find them giving promise of danger to the state. Beltishazzar himself, he whom his people call Daniel, is no poor man; but he goes about with the slinking manner of a pauper, ill-kempt, unclean, dirtily dressed, and yet—mark it well, O prince—he is not seldom seen in the company of temple priests, with Amraphel himself sometimes, and with Vul-Ramân of Bit-Yakin."

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Ribâta paused, noting with regret that he had brought a frown of trouble into the brow of Belshazzar, and that the prince was slipping away from the present scene of enjoyment to a realm of anxious thought. "Priests!" he muttered, half to himself. "Priests again! Priests forever! Priests! I tell thee, Ribâta," and his voice rose high with anger—"I tell thee that should Babylon ever fall it would be at the hand of a priest. Their power is mightier than that of the throne. Everywhere through the land they—"

He broke off suddenly, displeased with himself for having spoken in such a manner here. Two eunuchs were entering from the lower end of the room, and they seated themselves on either side of the door-way, with zithers on their knees. Behind them appeared a woman, or, more properly, a girl, lithe and slender, with pretty, vacant face and floating black hair twisted with golden ribbons. Her feet were sandalled in red and gold. Her dress was of flying, yellow gauze,

with a girdle of crimson. Scarlet poppies were bound about her head, and a crimson scarf was in her hands. She halted in the door-way with an air of grave modesty, performed a humble obeisance before the two men, never lifting her eyes to the face of either; and then, as the zither-players began their music, she, Khamma, began the dance. Certainly she was a graceful creature, and, in her dreamy way, possessed of a perfect sense of rhythm. Belshazzar watched her with half-closed eyes. Ribâta's attitude was that of polite weariness. While the dance progressed, both men replenished their wine-cups, and occasionally addressed each other in an undertone. Khamma did not look at them. Nevertheless her whole body was cold with emotion, and as she continued the dance she trembled, and her very teeth chattered with terror and delight at the near presence of Belshazzar. Ordinarily she had remarkable powers of endurance, and often danced for half an hour at a time before Ribâta. But to-day was different. At the end of fifteen minutes she was in a state of utter exhaustion; and, as the eunuchs, noting her condition, mercifully began their closing harmonies, she advanced up the room to the foot of the daïs, and presently sank, half swooning, in the last prostration before her master.

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Ribâta glanced at his friend. "Wilt thou have her?" he muttered, too softly for the girl to hear.

Belshazzar considered, and a different expression came over his face. "Nay," he said.

"What sayest thou!" cried Ribâta, in astonishment. "Since when dost thou refuse my gifts? Is she so unlovely?"

At this last phrase, which she had heard, Khamma looked up, straight into Belshazzar's eyes. Instantly a sharp sigh, like a groan, escaped her lips, and in spite of himself the prince softened.

"She is fair—enough. Let her be conveyed to my house. Thy gift could not be unwelcome, Ribâta, thou knowest it. Accept this, my brother, in place of her."

Belshazzar took from his shoulder a pin of beautifully wrought gold and fastened it upon his friend's sleeve. Ribâta's little displeasure was dispelled, and, after returning affectionate thanks, he signalled the eunuchs to come forward and lead the girl away. Before going she knelt before Belshazzar, and left upon his feet the hot imprint of her lips. This act affected the recipient in a curious way. His color suddenly fled. The storm-eyes opened wide, and flashed with a new fire. He drew a gasping breath, and then, while his face grew crimson, the veins in his neck and in his temples swelled out in bright, purplish blue. His muscles twitched with emotion. Ribâta, watching him with a smile of sympathy, looked to see his comrade rise and run after the dancer. But, to Bit-Shumukin's vast amazement, he perceived that, for the first time in all his life, Belshazzar was fighting fiercely with himself. The animal in him was a very lion in strength, but the opposing force was this time stronger. What this force was Ribâta had yet to learn. Belshazzar, tight-lipped, lay back again upon the cushions, his two fists hard-clenched. Ribâta bent over him and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

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"What is this, Belshazzar?" he asked, softly.

Belshazzar looked into his face with an inscrutable smile. "It is Istar, Ribâta, Istar my goddess." Then, with a long-drawn cry, all the strange, warped, blasphemous emotion in him burst forth: "Istar! Istar! Istar! Beloved! Lift me up! Make me divine, or cause my mind to lose the thought of thee! Istar! The iron sears my soul!"

"Belshazzar!" exclaimed Ribâta, in horror. And then, in an undertone, he muttered: "By Nebo and Bel, our sins overtake us! He is going mad!"

V THE JEW

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On that July afternoon Amraphel, the high-priest, left the presence of the king, bearing with him not only the discomfiture of a defeat at the hands of Belshazzar. He had lost much that it had been his hope to obtain, but he had also gained something that might prove more valuable than what he had lost. Even if this something were a mere suspicion, unfounded, not to be proved, yet it was what might, by adroit management, be built up into a successful rumor which, spread through the city, would form the first step in the long flight from the top of which Istar, now the greatest menace to Amraphel's power, might some day be hurled, in broken radiance, to her doom.

Up to this time, for hundreds, perhaps thousands—nay, as the naïve Berossus has it, hundreds of thousands—of years, the Babylonians had worshipped, nominally, their gods and spirits: virtually, they had bowed before the priesthood and its orders. The priests themselves, knowing no gods, had, from all time, held in their hands unlimited power. For many centuries the king himself had been a patêsi of Anû—high-priest of the sky-god. Then, when the temporal ruler became a man apart, when the office was secular, and when Babylon had writhed under the lash of Nineveh, the people had always their religion. The high-priest and his seers became more than ever absolute; ruling king and slave by means of unreasoning superstition; while in the houses of the priesthood the gods were regarded as an amusing myth. But now—*now*—for two years past, all Babylonia, from Agâdé to the gulf, had been in a state of feverish religiosity, for the reason that there was a goddess in Babylon: a goddess—a living, baffling, radiant presence, whose origin none knew.

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Amraphel was baffled by her at every point; but, trained from his birth up to a creed of absolute materialism, he still refused to believe in her divinity, because he had lost the power to rise to a conception of divinity.

To-day, as his carriage rolled slowly across the great bridge to the east side of the city, the high-priest pondered again over this problem of problems, though now less than ever seemed there any way of solving it. Down the Mutâqutû, the second boulevard of Babylon, and from there to the great temple of Marduk, the largest building in the city, but second in size to that of Bel in Borsip, he went. By now the sacrifice and heave-offerings for the afternoon would be ended, but it was Amraphel's self-appointed task daily to inspect the temple, the shrine, and the priests' rooms, before he retired to the college of Zicarû for the evening meal and a talk with his under-priests.

The monster temple and the great square of Marduk were aglow with the sunset as Amraphel's chariot drew rein at the platform steps. The old man alighted with his customary assurance. He had not reached the platform itself when his eye was caught by a figure in front of him moving slowly towards the temple door. It was a lean and sorry figure, ill-clothed, and hardly clean: that of a man hook-nosed and hawk-eyed, who leaned wearily on his staff and muttered to himself as he went. Him Amraphel overtook and familiarly accosted.

"Surely, Daniel, thou goest not into the house of a 'false god'?"

The Jew turned on him with a sour smile. "Yea, I go for my haunch of the day's heave-offering. God pardons a poor man the acceptance of unsanctified food."

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"A *poor* man—ay, verily. But since when art thou poor, Jew?"

Daniel turned an ugly look upon the high-priest, who, having motives for policy, suddenly changed his tone and said, in a low voice:

"Come thou and talk with me. The heave-offering, or something better, shall be sent to thine abode. There is a near matter that waits discussion."

The Jew consented silently to the proposal and followed the high-priest into the temple, across its vast hall, and back into one of the small rooms used only by priests. The little place was empty, and Amraphel seated himself in it with an affectation of feebleness. His back was to the light, and he motioned his companion to a seat whereon the last gleams of dying sunlight would fall direct from the small window behind the priest. Daniel sat down, drew his garments together, laid his staff across his knees, and caused his face to fall into an expression of vacancy that betokened the utmost alertness of mind. Amraphel had, however, not the least intention of trying deceit with his companion. Rather, he was about to risk a very daring piece of frankness upon this ruler of captive Judea.

"Daniel," said the old man, speaking in Hebrew, "you have told me that your people worship one only God. In your holy scriptures is there any word of another—a goddess—that is divine?"

"No!" was the quick answer.

"Hast thou—" Amraphel bent towards him—"hast thou beheld, closely, her whom they call Istar?"

"Yea."

"Hast thou spoken with her?"

"Perhaps."

"Nay, be not cautious with me, Jew. I speak from my heart. I ask as one that knows nothing, what is the idea of thy mind concerning the woman that dwells in the holy temple of the goddess? Is she divine?"

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"Divine! Say rather that she is the incarnation of Satan! Her heart is full of evil."

"Yet you see in her a supernatural power?"

Amraphel asked the question with unmistakable anxiety; and Daniel, raising his eyes, glanced for an instant into those of the priest. It was the only answer that he gave, yet it was the one that Amraphel had most feared. So, then, Daniel himself did not know the secret of Istar's existence. It was well enough to call her an incarnation of evil. That, according to Amraphel's way of thinking, did not at all lessen her power. It was a rather discouraging silence that fell between the two; a silence that Daniel finally broke.

"Why, O Amraphel, dost thou question me about the woman of Babylon? What would you with her?"

The high-priest hesitated for a bare second. Then he answered, openly: "I would have her driven from Babylon! Driven hence, because—because she menaces the state. Because she takes our power from us. Because with her the Elamite may find himself powerless against the city."

Daniel drew a sharp breath. "Cyrus, too!"

"Sh! Be silent! That name spells death. But consider what I have said. The people of the city worship their 'goddess' as they no longer worship the great gods of the silver sky. Should there come a time when Bel and Marduk commanded the surrender of the city to the Elamite, if Istar

held not to us, if she raised her voice in behalf of the old dynasty, in behalf of the tyrant, then indeed our lives might well be forfeited. For when she commands, the people obey. And hark you, Daniel, I fear that Istar of Babylon will not have the blood of Belshazzar redden the streets of the Great City."

"Nay; for she *loves* the tyrant Belshazzar!"

"Ah! You say it!" Amraphel, in high excitement, half rose from his place. Here were his suspicions most unexpectedly confirmed. [Pg 180]

Daniel, the imprudent words having escaped him, sank apathetically back in his place, giving the high-priest to understand by his attitude that nothing further was to be expected from him on that subject. And Amraphel had the tact to waive the point. He felt it to be too broad for discussion; for, in spite of himself, Istar roused in him unmistakable feelings of awe. But now there was at least a strong bond of sympathy between himself and Daniel. Amraphel realized that, and began at last upon the real object of his conversation—a description of the proposed festival at Erech, the three days that Istar was to spend in that holy house.

"And why," queried Daniel, quietly, "should she not remain in Erech, the seat of her ancient worship? Surely that were well for all Chaldea?"

"Ang!—all Chaldea—not for Belshazzar, the king's son," was the reply.

Daniel looked at his companion with a twinkle in his eye. "If they were but married!" he muttered to himself, not quite daring to speak the words. But aloud he said, softly, with stress on every syllable: "Yet, Amraphel, if Istar of Babylon leaves the Great City, who is there to say that she shall enter it again?"

"None! As I am priest of Babylon, there is none that may say it! Yet—yet—I do not perhaps understand thy words."

The Jew relapsed. "I said nothing!" he replied.

"Yea, thou saidst. Say again, Jew, *how* shall Istar not return again into the Great City?"

Daniel would not speak; but Amraphel, perceiving that much lay behind the obstinacy, tried every means in his power to open the mind of his companion. Finally the high-priest, driven to bay, took the risk, and, bending over the Jew, said, softly: "There is no deed that could be called by the name of just execution that I would not see performed—for the sake of Babylon and that captive race of thine that longs for liberty again." [Pg 181]

Thereupon Daniel, straightening, answered and said: "God is not flesh, but spirit. I, with mine eyes, have perceived that Istar of Babylon is of the flesh. Therefore, priest, she must be mortal, and subject, as all of us, to death. There be points of bronze and of iron which, piercing the body, free the soul. So Istar—"

"Thou hast said it! It shall be! When? Where?"

"It should be—thus." Daniel paused for a moment, his keen face working with his thoughts as he arranged the plan. "Belit Istar, the king, and the priests, descending Euphrates in boats, will come to Erech on the evening of the second day. Let the woman, on that night, go to rest in the sacred precincts of the temple, but not then penetrate to the sacred shrine. On the morning of the third day from Babylon all the people shall be assembled in the great hall of the temple that they may behold their goddess ascend into the shrine. Let her enter there alone for purification and for communion with the great gods her brothers. And look you, Amraphel, if she come not forth alive from that place it shall be for a sign that she was not divine, but an evil thing, that had indulged in unholy mockery, and had angered the great goddess Istar that dwells on high in the silver sky."

Not till after he had spoken did the narrow eyes of the Jew meet those of his companion; and he found Amraphel regarding him with grave stolidity. Such things as this that they were planning were in no way unheard-of among the holy orders; for the goat-skin, had it taken its true color, would, long years ago, have been dyed crimson with the blood of those slain under cover of its power. To be sure, Daniel did not wear this badge of office, and he proffered worship only to the God of Judea. But his was a captive race; and just at present his position was gallingly unimportant. Therefore he believed that there were no means actually unjustifiable for him to use to free himself and his people from their nominal captivity. Amraphel's next question, however, brought up a new train of thought. [Pg 182]

"And who is to perform this deed? Thou, Daniel?"

"Nay! Nay, verily!" Daniel spoke in haste. "Is it not written in the laws of Moses, 'Thou shalt not kill'? It must be a man of Babylon, not of Judea, that does this thing."

"Then shall some younger member of the priesthood be instructed to the deed: Vul-Ramân, of the temple of Nebo; Siatû-Sin, of the temple of Sin; Gûla-Zir, of Bel at Borsip—"

"Rather, Amraphel, than that one alone should be trusted to fulfil the difficult command, let there be three concealed within the shrine. So shall they gain courage, each from his fellow. Then there could be little danger of cowardice or of impiety."

"Truly, truly, that is well spoken. There shall be the three of them. Now, Istar hath not yet been

told of the approaching journey. I, on the morrow, bear the word of it to her. It cannot be possible, Beltishazzar, that from any source she could hear anything of this plan? Surely there is no danger that the dagger will fail to pierce her flesh?"

Daniel grinned evilly. "Ho, Amraphel! Thou that believest in nothing! Is it divinity now that you attribute to the woman? And where is divinity? Where is a god? Where a goddess? Those words are foolish."

"Time runs away. I must depart," observed the high-priest, rising hastily. "I go for the evening meal to the house of Zicarû. There also will be Vul-Ramân, and probably the others. Will you come with me?"

Daniel assented eagerly. It was not his idea ever to refuse a meal which would cost him nothing. Moreover, he was well known to the members of most religious houses, in which he was more or less respected as representing the great colony of Jews in Babylon, whose co-operation in the coming revolution was a very necessary thing. However little, then, the ex-prophet might be personally liked, his presence commanded a respect that was born of fear; and this, for him, in whose secret heart was implanted an implacable hatred for the race that held him and his people in so-called bondage, was enough.

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The house of Zicarû was a kind of monastic institution in which unordained members of the priesthood received an education, and where all the various under-priests and attendants of the various temples might lodge and eat. One of these houses was supported by nearly every temple of Babylon, and the luxurious rooms of the house of the temple of Marduk were the resort of high-priests and elders from every temple in the city. As institutions of learning, the monasteries were celebrated; and there were schools attached to them for the instruction of the laity in such courses of study as were not taught in the market-place. Astronomy, algebra, geometry, astrology, augury, and many languages—old Accadian, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Sanscrit could be learned there from the most efficient instructors in Chaldea. Without doubt the priesthood of Babylon was a highly intellectual order, and the people whom they ruled were ruled intelligently.

As Amraphel and the Jew reached their destination, daylight sank, at a breath, out of the sky. They found the world within at supper. The high-priest was greeted by a general rising, and the chief place at the head of the table was vacated for him by Vul-Ramân, of the house of Yakin, priest of Nebo and Nergal, next in rank to Amraphel. Vul-Ramân was a far younger man than his immediate superior, and his face was pleasantly expressive and unusually animated for a Babylonian, who, of all peoples, were the most impassive.

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Amraphel took the place at the head of the table with accustomed dignity, while Daniel found a seat farther down, among the elders, and his yellow face lighted with pleasure as he smelled the savory odor of roasted meats taken from the day's sacrifices. No table in the city, barring the king's own, was furnished so lavishly or so richly as this; for the rarest offerings made each day to Father Marduk were sent to this larder at sunset. That which was not eaten was afterwards given away to the poor, who nightly clustered about the gates of the house, giving thanks to the gods for their generosity.

Amraphel was a small eater, and never eager for food. To-night his beef remained before him untasted. His bread was unbroken, and the barley paste grew stiff and cold as he sat drinking cup after cup of the wine of Lebanon, talking with those around him, using eyes and brain keenly as he watched the right moment at which to speak. Vul-Ramân and Siatû-Sin were side by side upon his left; while, as fortune arranged it, Gûla-Zir was next but one upon his right, having come in from Borsippa for the night.

Amraphel knew that every man at that table was at his command, unquestioningly, day or night. None would dare dispute his word; none dare even to ask his motive for a deed. Nevertheless he carefully bided his time, waiting till the moment when that that he had to propose might seem not only possible to do, but, in the interest of their creed, the most desirable of all deeds. The time arrived. Vul-Ramân had happily made reference to a somewhat similar affair of many months before, the results of which had been beyond question beneficial—from the priestly point of view. Amraphel took the last words out of the other's mouth, turned them to unique account, and in less than five minutes had laid bare to his companions the skeleton of his design. It was done so deftly, so lucidly, and withal so delicately, that Vul-Ramân could not but regard his superior with envious admiration. The whole arrangement of the murder was planned by suggestion. Not once was an imperative used. Yet the man of simplest mind could not have failed to see what was to be done, how, and by whom. Amraphel concluded more boldly with a phantasy of the deed:

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"I can see the great and holy temple, and the many hundreds that stand within, waiting the coming of Belit Istar. I see the steps ascending to the holy shrine all carpeted with stiff gold. At last I behold her coming radiantly into the dusky temple-room. Her tresses float lightly behind her; her tresses, like spun silk, hang as a veil about her shoulders. Falsely now she moves between the rows of kneeling men and women. Falsely she glides up the holy steps, and, profaning all holiness, draws aside the curtain of the sanctuary and enters alone into the little room. The curtain falls again, concealing her from the watching eyes. Silently and swiftly do the faithful of the great gods steal behind, seizing her about the throat, with firm hands stifling her cries of terror. Before her stands her judge. The instrument of his justice is in his hand. Well he wields it. Three times it strikes swiftly to the heart of the woman. The silent body is left in the shrine. Only the false soul wails its way into the dismal land of Ninkigal. The judges, high in favor

with the gods, depart even as they came, by the statue-door in the back of the shrine. In high heaven the true Istar sings for joy. Crowns and much wealth she gives to those that have served her. And now, down the golden carpet that covers the steps leading up to the high place, flows a long thread of crawling crimson, which, with its brightness, shall speak to the people of the mortality of her whom falsely they worshipped. Belit Istar shall be discovered to them as a woman."

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These artistic and well-chosen words of the high-priest were greeted by all those around him with mental applause. The three men detailed for the work eagerly accepted their task, and were enviously regarded by their companions; for would not the true Istar, doubtless in the person of Amraphel himself, reward them with "crowns and much gold"? Ah! In the days of the great gods how might a prince have envied his priest!

At the end of the meal, details of the forthcoming murder were discussed by Amraphel and the three priests in a room apart. After everything was properly understood Amraphel quietly left the house, and, once more mounting his chariot, made his way homeward through the long, dark streets. His mind was at peace. The defeat at Belshazzar's hands of the early afternoon, had merely necessitated another battle, in which, this time, victory to the other side was an assured thing. There would be little fighting about it. The disposition of forces was the simplest in the world. There remained only two things to do. A vast celebration must be decreed, through Nabu-Nahid, for all Babylonia; and, more delicate task, Istar herself must be persuaded into taking an interested part in the festival. This last thing could best be done by himself. And in order to prepare himself as adequately as possible for the coming interview with the goddess in her own temple, Amraphel betook himself at this early hour to his couch, and shortly after lying down, mind and body alike being at rest, the aged and reverent man sank serenely to sleep.

Unique as was Istar's outer life, splendid as were her surroundings, awful and holy the places in which her time was passed, yet to an ordinary person her existence would have been intolerable. Her absolute isolation was something that those who regarded her from the outside never considered. To them she was above all ordinary things. She was part of many a pageant, a dazzling vision to be looked upon, stared at, frequently prayed to in various affected ways, but in the end treated as something inhuman, some one far from real life, the real world, real feelings of joy and of sorrow. Gradually she had grown accustomed to her vast solitude. Her loneliness was uncomplaining; but her days were interminably, cruelly long. This was one reason why, when Lord Amraphel asked audience of her on the morning after the breaking of Charmides' lyre, she joyfully granted the request.

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Istar lay upon a pile of rugs in the prettiest interior court of her dwelling behind the temple, listening to the distant droning of a flageolet that came from a narrow street behind the temple platform. The rays of her aureole had been very faint; but, as Amraphel was announced to her, her veil of light quickened into new life, and the vibrations pulsated rapidly, as if to protect her from close contact with some dangerous force. The high-priest was ushered into the divine presence preceded by four eunuchs and followed by two black pages. Three times he prostrated himself before her, with every mark of humility and reverence. After the third obeisance Istar commanded a chair to be brought for the old man, and bade him be seated in her presence. Amraphel, however, with a sudden, inexplicable qualm, refused the honor.

"Belit Istar," he began, after a prolonged silence which Istar had not thought of breaking, "for two years now, ever since the miracle of the incarnation, you have dwelt secluded in the Great City. Here all men have worshipped you in awe and in love. But now, from that city in which your first earth-life was lived, where, in the early dawn of Chaldean history, you and your bright Tammuz and the mighty Izdubar dwelt together, your people cry aloud to you again. By the benevolent generosity of Nabu-Nahid, their king, the men of Erech have raised a new and mighty temple in your honor, have called it by your name, and they pray, through my mouth, that you will go down into Erech and will with your divine presence consecrate the far-famed holy house in which henceforth, in all honor and glory, you will dwell. This, to-day, is my mission to you, Lady of Heaven. May my words find favor in your ears!"

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While he spoke to her Istar had watched the man with troubled eyes. Something in his way of speaking moved her to distrust and to unhappiness. When he had finished the trouble lay in her heart, and she rebelled inwardly against him. But when she spoke, it was but to ask, quietly:

"The people of Erech pray me to go down among them. When would they have me come, and how?"

"Eight days hence they wish to consecrate to you their new temple. You, the king, the king's son, the priests, your own attendants, and many lords and slaves of the royal houses, will journey in barges down the great river. It will be two days before Erech can be reached; but entertainment will be provided by the way for you and for the king and the king's son. Musicians, dancers, and singers shall show their skill before you. Canopies will shade you from the fierce fires of Shamash. Cool wines and fruits and grains, with the flesh of cows, will be provided for your sustenance. Through the journey, Lady of Heaven, you shall know no want."

"And at the journey's end I shall behold the temple?"

"Not on the first night. At sunset of the second day's journey the sacred city will rise up before you; and all night there will be feasting and rejoicing. You will be housed as fittingly as mortal men can make your lodging, in the long rooms behind the temple. Far more spacious are they than these. Here, in communion with the gods your brothers, the night will quickly pass away; and when the morning dawns, and many people fill the temple, then you shall enter among them, and shall pass up the steps of the sacred shrine and shall enter into the high place, where purifying water will be placed in the deep. When this water is blessed at your hands it will be carried down among those in the temple and sprinkled over them, and thereby great miracles will be performed. Then, when you sit in the mercy-seat and receive the holy prayers of the people, giving them leave to address you and worship your holy name, all lower Babylonia will fall upon its knees before you, will proffer sacrifice, and hold in highest honor you that are come to dwell among them. Yea, and the city of Erech shall be forever holy among cities. O goddess, may my words find favor in your ears!"

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Istar listened to these words as to the others, quietly, but with a distrust that she would have been unable to explain. When the high-priest ceased to speak she let the silence remain unbroken for some minutes. Finally, rising up before him, she replied, more dogmatically than she had ever spoken to any one:

"I, O Amraphel, will go down into Erech, and there will I consecrate, as much as in my power it lies, this newly erected temple. I will listen there to the prayers of the people, and will answer them if I may. Yea, for three days I will take up my abode in the city of Erech. But longer than that I will not tarry. Babylon is the seat of my dwelling; and in Babylon I will fulfil my time. Moreover, let not the festival be ordered till two more Sabbatû be passed. Then shall the barges at the great bridge be made ready, and the king, and the king's son, and the priests, and lords, and slaves may assemble there on the twentieth day of this month of Ab. Lo, I have spoken."

Amraphel made no protest. Once again he prostrated himself before her, in token of obedience to her will. Then, for a moment, he made an effort to scan her face. But the light flowed round about it so that he could perceive nothing. Presently there came over him a sudden rush of dread lest she should read the thoughts in his heart. Yet as his hands touched the hem of her garment she did not shrink from him; and, as he turned to leave her, she looked upon him with kindly eyes. He left her presence with perplexity and doubt in his mind; though how it had entered in he could not have told. *Was* Istar human? *Could* she be divine? As the old man drove rapidly away down the Â-Ibur-Sabû, it seemed to him that the firm, material beliefs of fifty years were swept from his mind, and he was left again as a child before whom the world and its inscrutable mysteries are opening for the first time.

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When the high-priest was gone, Istar rose from the rugs upon which she had sunk back for the moment, and began to move slowly up and down the sunlit court. As she went the rays of her aureole grew dim, till the embroidery of her purple robe could be distinguished, and her hair glistened only under the beams of the sun. And Istar's thoughts, like her steps, were slow. She would neither define nor analyze them. Only, being as ever alone, she murmured them aloud to herself; and it was as well, perhaps, that no one was at hand to hear her, as she said, softly:

"The king will go—and the king's son! Twelve days—and then—Belshazzar, the—king's—son."

VI ISTAR OF ERECH

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Early on the morning of July 20th, half Babylon assembled at the great bridge that connected the king's road with the Mutâqutû. Floating on the water, beneath the bridge and along the west bank, were the twenty magnificent barges destined to bear a divine and royal company down the well-flowing river to the ancient city of Erech. It was not many hours after dawn that the start was to be made. Istar, driven in her flaming car, arrived in good time, but too late to see the parting between Amraphel, who could not leave Babylon, and his three trusty priests, Vul-Ramân of Bit-Yakin, Siatû-Sin and Gûla-Zir, priest of Father Bel in Borsip. Their barge had been placed farthest from that of Istar, for the purpose of attracting as little notice as possible. Their words with their master were not many, but they were well chosen. Vul-Ramân was smiling grimly as he moved to his place. The other two were serious, a little pale, perhaps; but in neither heart was there any thought of drawing back from the purpose.

Istar was in her place before the royal party arrived: Nabu-Nahid in one chariot, Belshazzar with Ribâta in another, and behind them a long line of lords, councillors, judges, and members of their households. As the prince stepped from his vehicle to the embankment, Istar caught sight of him. At the same instant his eyes, moving hurriedly over the scene as if in search of something, encountered hers. A quiver passed through each of them, and which was most affected it would be difficult to say.

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In the general mêlée of embarkation that followed, Belshazzar and his party managed to obtain the barge to the right of that on which Istar lay. Nabonidus and his officials were on the left; and after them formed the lines of other boats, three abreast. When every one was safely in his appointed place, and the fastenings had been cut, Istar's boatmen raised a long, quavering cry, that resolved into the first notes of a song. In this the men of every boat joined; and by the time

the first phrase was at an end, the long, thick-bladed oars were moving regularly through the water, and the brilliant pageant was moving down the ancient stream.

To Istar the hours of this, her first day's journey, were long dreams of pleasure. She had known nothing of the course of this river after it left the confining banks of the city, through which it flowed darkly, rapidly, unbeautifully. Now the freedom of its winding course, the native life, and the richness of verdure along its banks, the mighty palm-forests, the long stretches of grain-fields, the picturesque irrigators at which men were continually at work, the droves of cattle and water-buffalo on the banks, the troops of cranes, pelicans, and flamingos in the water itself, the very warmth, the singing of the hurrying river, and the mournful answers of the boatmen, brought to her such a novel sense of joy and content as she had never before known. If men loved life as she did for this moment—then she had already discovered the secret of the Great Master. It was freedom—freedom to roam at will through the fair world, with no tie to bind one to any spot—the whole world one's home, one's delight.

This day, with all its varied beauty, ended at last—melted away through the short, purple twilight into a starry night. The songs of the rowers died. The river was very still. Those in the boats dropped away to sleep, one by one. Only Istar lay through the velvet hours open-eyed, trying to fathom the depths of this delight of hers—the delight that in some way had not all to do with the day and the scenery. She seemed now to have entered into life. Till to-day she had been so protected, so hedged about with ceremonial and form, so hindered by her supposed divinity, that now, in this first flush of her freedom, there rose again from her heart that deep cry for mortality that should bring her true knowledge as to the falseness or truth of the new-found joy. She had hoped for Allaraine to come to her that night; but the hours wore away, and when false dawn foreshadowed the morning he had failed her for the first time since her incarnation. There was a little sadness over this; but it was forgotten, presently, in the general stir of waking, of eating, and of greeting the exquisite first moments of the day.

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Just as the barges started at full speed again after the long night of drifting, there came an incident that changed the aspect of the second day from dreamy content to uneasy, troublous delight. One of Istar's fan-slaves, whose duty it was to waft before her one of the long-handled, peacock-feather fans, had disappeared in the night, no one knew whither or why. Nothing was said to Istar about it. Some one had taken the slave's place. Her fans were waving as usual. It was an hour before some slight awkwardness in the manipulation of the implement caused her to glance up at the wielder of it. Instantly a sharp cry escaped her lips. It was Belshazzar who was playing the slave. Instantly she bade him cease the work and return to his barge. This, stubbornly enough, he refused to do; and the matter was finally ended by a eunuch taking his place, while he lay down at the prow of Istar's boat, with his face turned towards the goddess, who reclined uneasily on her cushions, seeking to avoid his glance, but returning to it again and yet again, perhaps not wholly against her will.

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As Amraphel had foretold, the city of Erech appeared to them like a shadow through the twilight of the second day, rising, many-towered, from the east bank of the river. Darkness had come on before a landing was made. Great bonfires had been lighted all along the banks of the river; and thousands of people stood thronged together in their flaring light, waiting to welcome their goddess and their king. Lusû-ana-Nuri, the governor of the city, with his lords and judges, stood at the landing-stage. Istar, supported on the one side by Vul-Ramân, on the other by Siatû-Sin, waited till the prostrations of the governor were at an end, and then mounted the magnificent car prepared for her, on which she was drawn slowly between endless lines of kneeling and awe-struck citizens to her new abode, the vast temple of Istar of Erech, rebuilt by Nabonidus on the site of that ancient one that her prototype was said to have inhabited thousands of years before.

On the temple platform, back of the great ziggurat, was the third building—the dwelling-house of the living goddess; a palace of a hundred rooms, pricelessly furnished and decorated. Hither, alone in her car, Istar was driven. It had been arranged that the king and all of his accompanying suite, together with Prince Belshazzar, should proceed with the governor to his palace, where a huge feast had been prepared. The goddess herself, it had been thought, would prefer to pass this night in communion with her heavenly brothers, in preparation for the ceremony of the morrow. At the entrance of her new abode she was received by a large company of eunuch priests, and of female Ukhatû and Kharimatû, together with veiled nuns, prophetesses, and dancing-women. By these she was surrounded, and reverently conveyed to an inner room, where was spread a savory repast. Of this she partook in solitude, to the mournful sounds of flutes, lyres, and cymbals playing a slow, rhythmical dance, to which two maidens postured before her. It was a lonely and a dreary meal—one such as she had been long accustomed to, but which these two short days on the river, where there had been many people, and laughter and gay singing, had rendered more distasteful than ever before. Having eaten a little, Istar requested that she be conveyed to her sleeping-room and there left alone; for the strange faces and awed behavior of those about her rendered her more forlorn than she would have been in entire solitude.

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The sleeping-chamber was a long, narrow hall—the usual shape of Babylonian and Assyrian rooms. At one end of it, on a raised daïs, was a couch of ivory and beaten silver, piled high with rugs and cushions of the most costly materials. The walls and the narrow door-way were hung with rich embroideries of a deep, purplish-blue color. The tiled floor was strewn with rugs and skins, and the whole room was dimly lighted with swinging-lamps of wrought bronze. Chairs of ebony, teak-wood, and ivory, with tables of the same materials, were placed about the apartment. High in the wall at the lower end was a little, square window through which might be seen a single brilliant star.

Istar looked around her with pleasure. Two attendants remained at her side till a eunuch slave had brought in a silver tray containing a jar of rare wine with a golden drinking-cup. This he placed on a table near the couch. Then all three of them, obedient to her command, departed, after a series of the tiresome prostrations that were a continual weariness to her.

And now, at last, she was quite alone again—alone with the night, with the great silence, with the dimly burning lamps, and with the awe-inspiring hush that had settled over her. She seated herself upon a low chair and folded her hands upon her knees. The presence of God was distinguishable in the room. All thought of the day that had just passed was gone from Istar now. She felt a sense of the vastness of time, and of the immateriality of all things. She seemed to be alone in a great void, a void filled by the incomprehensible power of the universal master. Her own thoughts frightened her. Her breath came more slowly. For a little time it seemed to her that to-night she was to return into her former state. Whether she welcomed the end with joy or with sorrow she could not have told. But the end was not yet come. How long it was before she was restored to herself by the appearance of the rosy cloud of Allaraine she did not know. The strains of music from his lyre came faintly to her ears, as from an immense distance. The mist and its well-known nucleus were there with her. Yet now, and for the second time, that nucleus did not take on its proper shape; was not formulated. Allaraine was striving vainly to come to her. Considering the great spirituality of her mood, this was doubly strange. Istar looked into the cloud with eyes that spoke her fear. The music itself melted—slowly died away. The cloud grew paler and more mistlike. Quietly Istar rose, and, with mental insistence, held out her arms. There was one last burst of chords—chords that fell as from a great height in organ-tones as dim and beautiful as the evening wind. The single phrase struck home to her heart; it was a phrase of sorrow, of warning, of preparation for coming evil; a phrase that spoke, as a voice speaks, of suffering. Then, once again, there was silence; a silence as oppressive as heat. The window was clear again, and through it the star could be seen. The odor of sandal-wood was strong in the room.

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Istar lay back in her broad chair. The memory of her old life grew faint. Babylon lay leagues to the north, and she was no longer part of it. The history of the ancient and sacred city in which this, her temple-dwelling, stood, the shadowy legends that clung about its crumbling and honored walls, presented themselves vividly to her mental vision. She seemed now to be a part of the spirit of that other Istar, the Love-goddess, who, in her great incarnation, had loved and married the warm and exquisite Spring, the Tammuz of present-day festivals, who had appeared in human form then, when the world was younger and more fair. And she knew also with what vehemence that Istar had loved the great hero, the slayer of lions, the man of wisdom and strength, Izdubar, who had sought her out for aid in battle when the power of his good genius, Êa-Bani, failed him. And that Istar of old had not failed. As she thought of the two, and how Istar the Love-goddess had become the woman of war, the lady of Arbela, the mind of this other of divine race was filled indiscriminately with the soft murmurings of spring and the martial clang of arms. Happy, indeed, had been that Istar of old; for she had loved, and had protected whom she loved, fearing none, obeying no power higher than herself. But now—if the people of the city were seeking such another as she had been, they must wait at last in their disappointment. Neither Tammuz nor Izdubar—neither beauty nor strength—had come to her to love her; nor could she have given all that her predecessor knew so well how to give. Love! What was it? Vague imaginings flitted through the Narahmouna's mind. She paused, in thinking, to hearken to the silence. A city of sleep lay about her on every hand. Stirred any creature there through the night? Her head drooped upon her knee. She listened to the throbbing of the stillness. Yea, some one besides herself was awake with the darkness. She could distinguish soft footsteps near her door. Some slave, no doubt, was going to a vigil in the temple. Silence again. The steps had not died away, but seemed suddenly to stop near by her very portal. Istar listened again, but still did not lift her head. She knew that the curtain overhanging the door-way was being pushed aside. There was some one else in the room with her. She felt the presence, and her heart ceased to beat. Yet it was not fear that sent the blood to her heart. Only when the some one was very near, when the fold of a flowing mantle touched her shoulder, did she finally lift her bowed head and look. At the same instant, before she could rise up, half in terror, half in joy, the man sank abjectly at her feet. A white, fearful, half-daring face was lifted up to her. A pair of haunted storm-eyes caught and held her look. A moving, nerveless hand clutched the hem of her garment.

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Istar hardly breathed. It was all too vague, too dreamlike, too impossible, for her to realize what had happened. She was without fear, yet she shook like an aspen. She let her eyes answer that other look. Then, from the gaze, something was born within her. Something choked her. She gasped for breath. Finally, with a sudden cry of terror, she covered her face with her hands and rose unsteadily to her feet.

Belshazzar did not stir; neither did he take his eyes from her as she moved across the room. His heart was pounding furiously against his side, and his head swam with the power of the emotion that had driven him in this way to her presence. A wonderful thing passed before his eyes. That veil of light, that had held the goddess safe in its protective depths since her incarnation, was almost gone. It had been rent and torn from her by the force of the change within her; and now it hung around her form in thin, glittering shreds that melted away like hoar-frost in the sunlight. At last he saw unconcealed what that had so long unbearably tantalized him: that which, hitherto, had only revealed itself to him by accident, a line, a single curve accentuated by a gesture, at a time. Now, all at once, it was before him quite visible—the delicate, fragile form of a perfect woman, clad in clinging draperies of purple embroidered in silver, sandalled in silver, the head uncrowned, the waves of silken, black hair falling unbound behind her.

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She had stood at the far end of the room, statue-like, for a long time, before he came back to himself, before he realized how he lay. Then, in some way, he got to his feet and went to her; carefully by instinct; repressing himself at every step. She knew that he came, yet did not seem to shrink. Before he reached her side, however, he broke the silence between them, saying, huskily:

"Istar—do you bid me go?"

She did not at once reply, though he did not know whether or not she meditated over her answer. While she still paused, the eyes of the prince dilated with anxiety. Finally came the reply in a whisper so low that it was a miracle he heard it: "Not Istar of Arbela; Istar of Erech, I. Go—if thou wilt—"

In another instant Belshazzar was upon her, had taken her into his heroic arms, was drowning her cries of amazement in the passionate torrent of his emotion; and for a little she was still, while wonder took full possession of her. Then there came from her lips one cry that would not be silenced—a cry that rang through the room and passed out of the window, winging its way upward to high heaven: a cry of momentary anguish, of something forever lost, of something also gained. It was no more the voice of the Being Divine. It was that of a woman.

Hearing it, involuntarily, Belshazzar drew back from her, smitten with a kind of terror at what he must have done. She was there, wide-eyed and shivering, before him. The last shred of her aureole was gone. She sobbed. Her eyes had become blindly bright, and presently overflowed. In that first moment of humanity she wept. It was her destiny. Something more she did also. In her weakness, in her great solitude, she did what women will. All alone in a strange world, unsheltered, unprotected, amazed and confused by the great tumult raging within her, she turned to him who stood before her, the embodiment of human strength and beauty, and to him she held out her arms.

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Belshazzar went to her, not fiercely now, but reverently, almost as much amazed as she herself at this more than fulfilment of the dream that he had so long and so blasphemously cherished. Holding her again close in his arms, his senses reeled under the human warmth of her body. Bending his dark head over hers he whispered to her, in such a tone as he had never used before, those words that make the world immortal:

"Istar! Oh, my beloved! I love thee!"

One of her arms crept fearfully round his neck, and the tears from her eyes fell upon his cheeks, and he understood that she answered him. Knowing not what else was left for her, she clung to him the more closely as he lifted her slender body and carried her up to the daïs at the far end of the room. And so through the night, while the lamps burned low, and the white star sank from sight, for those two, through the wisdom of God, time ceased, and their souls were mingled with eternity. And over them, though neither of them saw, in answer to the mortal cry of their one-time sister, archetype on archetype descended from the height to watch over the place where Istar had become a woman.

Night, the enchanted night, the twenty-second of the burning midsummer month, hung heavily through the great spaces of the temple of Istar. Silence, far-reaching and luminous, spread within from the open portals, past the altar and the deep and the sacred recording-stone, to the foot of the first of the steps that led up to the curtained door of the sanctuary, within which the sanctification of the temple was to take place in the morning. The east was still black when the first dim figures, forerunners of the vast crowds that by sunrise would fill the temple to overflowing, passed the bronze gates and took their places at the foot of the sanctuary steps.

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White dawn entered, mistlike, through the portals of the high house, and the myriad temple lights that had pierced the night with their tiny points of flame grew very dim; and when at last the sun sent his first scarlet and golden messengers up the eastern sky to announce his coming, these lights came to resemble mere reflections of the burnished brass and beaten gold that covered the temple walls. By now there was an immense throng inside, and moment by moment it was augmented; for all Erech, and all the country-side for miles around, was making its way to this place. Finally the long-awaited Shamash leaped into the sky, holding before him his shield of glory, sending a great shaft of light into this dwelling-place of his sister Istar. A murmur of prayers for the morning rose up through the lofty spaces of the temple-roof, and the silence that followed these was intense with expectation; for now, at any moment, their goddess might come to them.

Within the sanctuary everything had long since been prepared. During the night several priestesses of Istar had kept a vigil there, offering up continuous prayers before the stone pedestal on which, in any other temple, the statue of the goddess would have stood. Water, over which one hundred charms and incantations had been said, filled the purifying basin. The place was sweet with the odor of spices, and its air hung hazy with incense. Beside the broad basin, upon a table plated with gold, stood a flask of perfumed oil, treasured for many years for use upon some such holy occasion as this. The little, windowless room was lighted by a swinging-lamp of exquisite workmanship, kept burning night and day in the perpetual gloom. In this place the consecrated hierodules had held their prayerful watch through the long night of the passion;

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and at dawn they left it empty, to await the coming of its divine occupant. Five minutes after the departure of the veiled women, however, the sanctuary was invaded by three persons who bore no resemblance to gods. Vul-Ramân and his two companions, their priests' dresses covered with long cloaks of sombre hue, glided in through the concealed door behind the pedestal. The three of them were pale and rather anxious-eyed as they took up the positions suggested by Amraphel. Vul-Ramân, only, carried a weapon: the same thin-bladed, delicate knife that he had used on more than one occasion similar to this. Twice he ran his finger carefully along the edge of the blade, and the last time his skin was neatly slit by the metal. Satisfied with the trial, he slipped the little instrument under his cloak again, and then the long, nervous vigil of the murderers began.

By the time the sun was half an hour high, the crowd outside the temple had become restless, and the close-packed rows of men and women were as impatient as they dared to be. No one of any importance had yet made an appearance. Surely the king, the prince, the governor, and their attendant lords should be here by this time. Would Istar come if they still delayed? Would that she might! And then, the mention of Istar again bringing up the most absorbing of all topics, every man and his neighbor fell to talking of how he had seen her on the previous evening on her way from the river to her temple; and on every hand were heard descriptions of her wonderful and unearthly presence. That baffling radiance that flowed about her was the veil of Sin, her father. It proclaimed her divinity as nothing else could have proclaimed it. Heretofore there had been not a little scepticism over the exaggerated reports brought down from Babylon during the two past years; but there was no scepticism in Erech to-day. Goddess she assuredly was; and as a goddess she should dwell in the heavenly house they had built for her, on ground consecrated to her many thousands of years ago.

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At last, from the street leading up to the temple, came a blare of trumpets and a clangor of cymbals, and a shiver of excitement overran the people when they realized the approach of the king and his royal train. Four ushers with lily-topped wands forced a passage through the crowd, and finally entered the temple itself, where the making of an aisle was no easy task.

Amid tumultuous shouts the lordly company left their chariots, and passed in processional line, between the people, clear to the foot of the sanctuary steps. Gentle-faced Nabonidus, arm-in-arm with the governor of the city, came first; and the throng made reverent way for them. Belshazzar, pale-faced and utterly overwrought, physically exhausted, mentally apprehensive, followed his father, walking alone. The people looked after him curiously as he passed, and many were the whispers to the effect that the prince-royal was a wild and dissolute fellow. After these three notables came the lords, judges, and councillors, Ribâta among them, more puzzled than he would have acknowledged at his friend's too apparent state of mind. This entire company found places immediately at the foot of the sanctuary steps. Nabonidus and his son faced each other, standing the one on the left, the other on the right hand of the spot where Istar must pause ere she went up into the high place. Both king and prince were in priest's dress—white muslin, goat-skin, and golden girdles, with anklets and bracelets of gold, and feather tiaras set in wrought gold. Seeing this garb, a few among the people chanced to remember the three Babylonish priests that had come down the river with the king. But there was no one that knew where they might be, and none cared enough to press an inquiry.

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Now, certainly, Istar was late. The people were tired and impatient, and there were not a few who, having waited here since dawn, complained bitterly of the divine tardiness. But there was only one person in that throng that suffered both physically and mentally with suspense. This was he who, one hour before, had left Istar's side; he who now stood, ghastly pale, heavy-eyed, and nerveless with anxiety, at the sanctuary steps. Could she come here this morning? Would she come? And how would the ordeal affect her? It seemed almost impossible that she could go through with it, overwrought as she was. Yet what would be the result with the people did she fail them?

Ah! What was that? The minor cadences of the chant of priestesses were to be heard outside the temple. She was coming then. She was here!

At the door of the temple stood a large company of yellow-robed women, half of them veiled, half of them with their faces bare. In their midst, as yet invisible to the people, was Istar. Still, they recognized her presence, and there was a sudden, vast rustling, as all that immense throng, with one impulse, sank to their knees there in the sacred hall. After a momentary pause on the threshold the ranks of the women parted, and Istar came forth alone.

Clothed like the sun she was, in tissue upon tissue of woven gold, that shimmered with a thousand rays. Her hair was crowned with gold, incrusting with deep-hued beryls, and from the back of the diadem floated a gold-wrought veil, beneath which lay her lustrous hair, a dark, silken mass. Dazzled at first by her shimmering garments, it was not till the second moment that the ten thousand eyes sought her face. Then—it seemed to Belshazzar that he could *feel* the change in the multitude. *Goddess?—That?—That* pale-faced, wide-eyed woman? Nay! And yet—she was beautiful. She was so beautiful in her unveiled pallor that she might well have been looked on as something more than human. There was no radiant aureole of divinity around her now. Perhaps that had been a twilight dream. And, the first shock of disappointment over, most of the people would have worshipped her still. Men's eyes followed her with inexpressible wonderment as, inch by inch, she moved up the aisle. What agony that passage was to her even Belshazzar could not know. She was barely conscious as she neared the steps; for it was the first time that she had ever really walked.

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To Istar's eyes the temple was dim. The murmur of whispers reached her as from a great distance. She realized vaguely what she was expected to do, while her eyes were riveted on one thing, and her soul was striving to leave her body that it might reach the sooner that which she loved. In the first instant of her mortality Belshazzar's image had been stamped indelibly upon her heart and in her brain. And now that he himself was there before her, she felt only that she must get to him. She cared to go no further.

The long distance was traversed at last. She stood at the foot of the sanctuary steps, Belshazzar close upon her right hand, the king upon her left, all the mass of people behind her. She must go up, she must mount up into the space that for a moment seemed to stretch out before her like the spaces of heaven—vast, limitless, infinite. She placed her foot upon the first step, hesitated for an instant, shivered with cold, then, with a mighty effort, lifted herself up and stopped. Perhaps it was well that at this moment neither Vul-Ramân above nor the crowd below could see her face. It bore an expression of fear, of horror, such as cannot be pictured by human imagination. Still she ascended one more step, and none could have realized the heroism that carried her there. Could she go on? Must she? Suddenly a great cry burst from her. Her face became livid. Her teeth chattered, and her hands worked nervelessly. She was forbidden to progress. There, towering above her in menacing wrath, was a throng of shadowy things, of huge wings, of heavenly forms, just discernible to her eyes, invisible to all others. The archetypes of heaven were before her, barring her way, crying her fall to her, driving her back from the high place to which no mortal might attain. One gesture she made—lifted both arms to them in pitiable pleading. Then, with a fainter cry, she reeled and fell, backward and down, and, while the mighty vision faded from her mortal eyes, Belshazzar caught her lifeless body in his arms. As he did so there came an uproar from every side of the temple: vague, indeterminate, angry murmurs, presently silent before one trumpet-voice, bolder than the rest, that voiced the feeling of the men of Erech. This cry was taken up and repeated, and cried again, till the temple-roof quivered with it, and the stoutest of hearts quailed before its wrath:

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"This is a woman! A woman! It is a woman!"

Belshazzar, with lion mien, and storm-eyes blazing with fury, faced them all with his burden in his arms; and, angry and disgusted as they were at the great deceit, not a hand was lifted against this prince of their blood who espoused the cause of the false woman, the pretender. As he bore her from them out of the temple, there was none to notice the parting of the sanctuary curtains; none to perceive the pale, peering face of Vul-Ramân of Bit-Yakin, whose glittering knife was cold with desire for human blood. The priest stared fearfully upon the general tumult; for of all that company he was now the only one that believed in the divinity of Istar of Babylon. For how but by divinity had she that morning escaped her death?

VII LORD RIBÂTA'S GARDEN

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Istar did not keep her word about Charmides' Greek lyre. It was not returned to him at all, whole or broken. So, after a little waiting, the Greek, hungry for an instrument, was obliged to replace his old one with one of the awkwardly fashioned Babylonian lyres, on which his skill was admirable, but which did not by any means produce the music of the Greek instrument. He felt the circumstance in two ways: one of disappointment with his goddess, the other as an omen—that the last tie that had bound him to Sicily was forever broken. Henceforth, in everything but complexion and religion, he was of Babylon. The Great City held every interest of his life. Everything that belonged to it was dear to him; and he wished nothing better than to have no distinction made, even in thought, between him and the natives of Chaldea. Only Apollo and the memory of his mother lived in his heart to remind him that his childhood had been something far away. And more than once, by night, thinking of the mother's loneliness, he sent her, by Castor and Pollux, fervent messages of affection. Perhaps Heraia received these and was content; for a mother-heart is quick to feel even a thought, though it be generated ten thousand miles away, and a mother can rise to any sacrifice for the happiness of the child of her flesh.

By the middle of July Charmides began to know Babylon, its ways and byways, very thoroughly. At first he had lost himself almost every time that he ventured from Ramûa's side; but, by much wandering to find his way back again, he learned the streets and their crooked twistings as not all of the old inhabitants knew them. He was likewise in a fair way to overcome his greatest and most uncomfortable difficulty—the language. His necessarily constant intercourse with those that knew no word of any tongue but their own, very shortly familiarized him with the commonest phrases of every-day life. Beyond this, his greatest help came from the temple in which he worked. During the long hours that he spent behind the high place, listening to the complaints and confessions of devout ones, and while he chanted the replies put into his mouth by the attendant priest, he had, perforce, to occupy his mind in some way; and the way most obvious was by trying to comprehend what he was saying, and what the people before him were talking about. With the assistance of the words that he had acquired, and his very slight natural aptitude, supplemented by an ardent desire to learn, he made quite astonishing progress. By the end of July it would have disturbed the priest not a little to know the thoughts that were in Charmides' head as, little by little, the gigantic system of deceit unfolded itself before him. But Charmides was discreet. Never

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by word or look did he betray the least knowledge of the Babylonish tongue, but performed his required duties regularly, and appeared satisfied with the position, while becoming gradually more and more disgusted with the realities of this new religion.

Some days before it was generally known in the city, Charmides learned from the temple-priests about Istar's journey to Erech. That her departure was to be for good was generally understood among the priesthood, though of the intended murder not a single member of the lower orders dreamed. The Greek, however, was sorrowful enough over her going; and it was the desire of his heart to be one of the musicians of the voyage. Of this, however, there was no hope; for Charmides had become too valuable an adjunct of the temple of Sin to be spared even for a week to the service of Sin's daughter. He, however, with Ramûa and Baba, went down to the waterfront by the great bridge, and looked, for what the Greek in his heart thought to be the last time, on the form of her for whom he had come to Babylon. For the next few days he was very unhappy. It seemed to him that he had in some way been untrue to his vow. Babylon was his Babylon no more; and were it not for Ramûa, he would have set out instantly for Erech. But Ramûa had become even more necessary to his happiness than the great Istar. To leave her would mean undying regret. Either way, apparently, his existence would be incomplete, and what to do to remedy it was a cause of speculation that was happily ended by Istar's return to Babylon. She came unheralded, in a covered barge, and went back to her temple in a close-fastened litter, surrounded by a troop of Belshazzar's cavalry. To all the strange tales and sinister rumors circulated through the city about this unexpected return, Charmides turned a deaf ear. She, his goddess, was again in her abode. It was enough.

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During this time the affairs of the Greek's non-professional life had become very absorbing. When his peace of mind was restored by the home-coming of Istar, he discovered that he was utterly and hopelessly in love with Ramûa. That Ramûa returned some part of his affection he sometimes, for a wild moment or so, permitted himself to hope; more often doubted so entirely that his misery seemed to be complete. She could not care for him, of course. Yet, barring the two or three hours a day that he spent in the temple, the two of them were never apart while the sun was above the horizon; and no one ever heard Ramûa object to the arrangement, or appear to be wearied by it. Eyes, ears, mind, and soul of each were all for the other, though as yet neither could believe that the other cared. And neither of them, in their joyous selfishness, perceived the little creature who stood apart from them both, watching in silence that which was bringing heart-break into her eyes. Poor Baba! Many a time by day, and more often still by night, Zor's silken coat was wet with her mistress' tears. Beltani had caught more than one stifled sob coming from the hard pallet in the dark hours; but Ramûa, wide awake, perhaps, yet dreaming of sunshine and bright hair, never heard at all, or else put it down to that most unpoetic of all sounds—a snore.

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One evening, some time after Istar's return from Erech, when Charmides had become more proficient in the Chaldean tongue, and when he also felt quite at home with Beltani and the two girls, he asked a question of which the effect on the family was something entirely unlooked for. It was simply as to how Ramûa obtained her daily supply of fresh flowers.

A silence, complete and strained, followed his words. Ramûa flushed. Baba hid her face on Zor's back; and even Beltani looked uncomfortable. Charmides, puzzled, and wholly ignorant of any reason for the silence, instantly feared some embarrassing mistake in his language, and quickly repeated the question in different words, wishing to remedy any possible impropriety that might have crept into his former speech. Ramûa now looked at him imploringly; but Baba, turning to her mother, said, in a low voice:

"Let us tell him. Then Bazuzu will no longer have to wait till so late. Now he loses his sleep."

Beltani considered for a moment or two.

"Let us trust him. He will be silent," said Baba again.

"No! No, indeed!" cried Ramûa, unhappily.

Baba regarded her sister with the slightest hint of scorn. "Will you always deceive him?" she said, bitterly.

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Then Charmides, not a little disturbed by these unpleasantly suggestive words, looked at Ramûa to find her lips quivering and her eyes ominously bright.

"Tell me of this thing! Let me hear, that I may know all!" he demanded, stumbling more than usual, in his new-born anxiety.

Then Beltani, perceiving that matters were being made to look worse than they actually were, took the affair into her own hands, and proceeded to answer at great length, with the assistance of many gestures and much tautology, Charmides' unfortunate question.

The tenement of Ut, in which Beltani and her family dwelt, was, as of course Charmides knew, separated from the palace and the extensive gardens of Lord Ribâta Bit-Shumukin only by the canal of the New Year, and by two or three hundred feet of waste ground on the other side of the stream. And in these gardens behind the palatial residence, bloomed, all the year round, flowers of every kind known to Babylonia and the West, in such countless numbers that a hundred blossoms taken daily from the wilderness of fragrance, could never be missed. Moreover, neither my Lord Ribâta nor any member of his household, ever, so far as Beltani knew, appeared in these

grounds. Therefore, if, every night, black Bazuzu went, unseen and unheard, into the gardens, and very carefully selected enough flowers for Ramûa's basket next morning, could either the gods or Ribâta be very angry? Nay, indeed, had not my lord himself on more than one occasion actually purchased a rose of his own from the flower-girl on the steps of the temple of Istar? And was not this a sign from heaven that the great gods winked at the whole proceeding? Ramûa might weep if she would. She had countenanced the arrangement for two years, and it was not exactly honest to be smitten now with repentance.

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Beltani finished her explanation a little defiantly and looked up, not without apprehension, to find Charmides' face filled with relief, and as cheerful as possible. Ramûa refused to look at him, though he was smiling at her broadly; and it was only when he said, "Let us together go and seek thy flowers for to-night," that she flashed at him a look of happy acquiescence.

Charmides' eyes grew brighter yet. Evidently that fateful garden was going to prove a little paradise for him. He had a quick and delicious vision of himself and of her shut far away from everything sordid and unbeautiful, wandering together through fragrant, flowery paths in the moonlight, whispering words meant only for the stars and for themselves. Moreover, this was a dream that might be repeated many times; for, while Ramûa must sell flowers for her livelihood, and Bazuzu deserved a night of unbroken rest, it—

Here this pleasing reverie came to a halting finish. Charmides suddenly felt that Baba's mournful, owl-like eyes were reading his thoughts as he would have read a Greek tablet. Beltani, too, was by no means blind; and she, at any rate, had not the slightest intention of permitting Ramûa and the hare-brained Greek to go alone together into Ribâta's garden. The good woman's mind was of a purely Babylonish turn, and the ideas attendant on a fine sense of honor had never occurred to her. Charmides, therefore, was not of high enough birth, nor possessed of sufficient wealth, to admit of any dangerous philandering. This fact Beltani made known to him in terms as terse and to the point as only she was capable of using. It was nothing that Charmides should clench his fists and grow purple with rage at the insult; or that Ramûa was ready to dissolve in tears of shame. To these things the good housewife closed her eyes pleasantly. What did they signify? She was mistress of the situation, and, as such, the feelings of others had no effect on her.

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The sunset hour was over at last, and the small household descended from the roof and entered their rooms, where the regular incantation was made and the prayers to Marduk and to Sin were said. Then Beltani and her daughters passed into the inner room, and Charmides was left alone for the night with Bazuzu.

In spite of his ill-humor, the Greek could not lay him down for the night without his address to his patron, Father Apollo. Bazuzu watched him as he knelt, his face turned towards the west, and saw his fretful expression gradually soften to one of reverence and love as the melodious words left his lips. Charmides did not guess how often and how closely Bazuzu followed his devotions, nor realize that, in the heart of the deformed black man, a very deep affection for himself had been growing throughout the summer. His prayers finished, he gave Bazuzu good-night and a smile, as he lay back upon his pallet. But sleep was not very ready to his eyes. Now that the explanation had been made, now that Ramûa's tearful face was no longer pleading with him, the matter of the flowers took on rather a different aspect in his mind. In the year 539 B.C. the Greek notions of justice were strict and well defined, and the laws were enforced far more stringently than in later times. The word theft was a synonym for dishonor. And Charmides was thoroughly imbued with the traditions of his race. Therefore, now that he had begun to consider the affair impartially, it had not a pleasant look. Twist it as he would, he could not but see that Ribâta was being wronged, and that—much worse!—the maiden who was dearer to him than anything else in the world, had been for two years an open party to this wrong. To be sure, Beltani was the originator of the scheme, and Beltani was the girl's mother. Implicit obedience to one's parents was also another law of Greek social life. Was Ramûa, after all, so much to blame? Then, as Charmides thought of his own mother, her honor, her goodness, her sympathy, there came to him the wish that he might be to Ramûa all that and more than his own mother had been to him. He determined that Ribâta should some day be made aware of this whole matter, and should be repaid for his loss by Charmides himself, who would have the right to do so when Ramûa was his wife.

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This thought came to him together with the first touch of drowsiness; and so comforting was the idea, and so heavy were his eyelids, that, five minutes later, the Greek was dead to the world. Thus he did not know when Bazuzu, basket in hand, slipped quietly away into the night. It was much earlier than the slave had been accustomed to depart; but, now that Charmides knew the household secret, Beltani's slave might as of old choose his hour of departure on the unlawful errand.

It was very dark to-night as he crept down the alley to the bank of the canal. The moon had passed the full, and its red rim had just peered over the horizon, as the slave, having crossed the little bridge over the stream and traversed the intervening distance between it and the garden, stood before the high hedge and the concealed opening in the wall through which he was accustomed to enter Ribâta's domain.

Bazuzu could have come to this place blindfolded and have entered with perfect accuracy. Now, for the thousandth time, he crawled in on his hands and knees, drew the basket after him, straightened up, and, looking neither to the right nor to the left, hurried over to the long bed of flaming red lilies, now in their prime, and, in consequence, Ramûa's chief stock in trade till the paler flowers of early autumn should come into bloom. Here, with by no means ungentle fingers,

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the black man began to pluck the shapely flowers, selecting them with such care that no one, casually overlooking the bed, could have perceived how many had been taken. Bazuzu was in no hurry. Perhaps, once here, he enjoyed being in the garden. Any one might, indeed, have enjoyed it, for the place was rarely beautiful. The newly risen moon, showing now above the shadowy, distant towers of the various temples, flooded the dreamy recesses of tropical verdure with a soft, bluish light that drew forth perfumes from every blossom, and caused the new-fallen dew in the flower-cups to glisten like opals. Occasionally Bazuzu paused in his work, and lifted up his head to look about him in the luxuriant stillness. Dimly he realized that even sleep rested and refreshed him no more than this. He did not now regret that Ramûa and Charmides had not been allowed to come here together. To what raptures of love their souls would have been drawn by the beauty of this scene, the black man did not know. In the midst of his small, untutored ecstasy, he passed from the lilies to a clump of rose-trees that overhung a pond where lotus-blossoms floated. It was here, while bending over the perfect specimens of the fair flower of Persia, that his quick ear caught the sound of steps—footsteps—coming measuredly towards him.

Bazuzu's heart gave a throb of terror as he looked up the path leading to the palace. Yes, it was true. Two figures—men—were approaching. Claspng the basket close to his breast, Bazuzu knelt and drew himself as far back as possible in the shadow of the rose thicket. He was no more than hidden when the men passed him, so closely that the rich mantle of one of them dragged over the slave's hand. Down to the hedge and then back by the same beaten path, always slowly, always earnestly conversing together, moved the twain; and as they passed him again, Bazuzu had recovered himself sufficiently to recognize both. One was Ribâta himself, lord of the house, whom Bazuzu knew, as a matter of course, to be Beltani's landlord. The other was a figure familiar to every one in Babylon: Bel-Shar-Uzzur, governor of the city and heir-apparent to the throne. It was he who talked most. Bazuzu watched him interestedly, for it was no small thing to sit listening to the conversation of royal princes. Hitherto, when he had chanced to see the prince, or when he had heard others tell of seeing him, Belshazzar had worn an air of over-confident and joyous pride, of haughtiness, even, for which he was none too well loved by his people. Perhaps now it was only the whiteness of the moonlight that changed him so; but to-night there was neither pride nor joy in that imperious face. A great pallor was on him and his look was troubled. From the fragments of speech that he caught, the slave could not determine what difficulty Belshazzar might be in. He spoke often of temples and of priests, and there was some one whom he never called by name, but spoke of as "she," or sometimes, extravagantly, as "Belit"—"goddess."

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In his interest in the scene before him, Bazuzu gradually forgot the danger of his position. A dozen times the two lords had brushed him as they passed, but never chanced to see the shadowy figure huddled at their very feet. Presently, however, in his eagerness to catch the end of a sentence, Bazuzu crept an inch or two forward, and did not draw back when the two turned towards him once more from the end of the path. They drew near, and Belshazzar's eyes were fixed on the ground. Ribâta was speaking, when, three feet from the thicket, Belshazzar suddenly seized his comrade's arm and stopped short.

"Dost thou, fearing danger, keep about thee concealed guards, Bit-Shumukin?" he cried, roughly.

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"What sayest thou, Belshazzar?"

For answer, the prince strode forward, stooped, seized Bazuzu by the collar, and dragged him to his feet.

There was a silence. The slave, cold with fear, stood open-mouthed, his eyes wildly rolling, the basket still clasped tightly in his arms. Ribâta, who had grown white with astonishment and anger, stood staring at him. Belshazzar, lips compressed and brows drawn together, moved aside.

"Are you of my house, knave? And for whom art thou here? Speak! Answer me!" And Ribâta stamped upon the ground.

Bazuzu, remembering, even in his terror, the helplessness of Ramûa, answered, shiveringly: "Yea, of thy house, O lord!"

"He lies, Bit-Shumukin," interrupted the prince, sharply. "His collar is of leather. Those of thy house—"

"Yes, yes!" cried Ribâta, still more angrily. "Speak the truth, thou villain, or—there is death in my garden. Who art thou?"

With thickening tongue and reluctant heart, Bazuzu made reply: "I am the slave of the Lady Beltani."

"And who is the Lady Beltani?"

"She dwells across the canal, in the tenement Ut of my lord."

"Ho! *Lady* Beltani! A dweller in Ut! And why, then, art thou here and not in thy lady's own spacious gardens?"

Bazuzu helplessly held out his flower-basket.

Ribâta seized it by the handle, and examined it and its contents. "These flowers—they go to beautify, no doubt, the person of the Lady Beltani?"

"My lord, they are sold by the Lady Ramûa, her daughter, who sitteth daily on the steps of the

platform at the temple of Istar, that she may obtain bread-money for her mother. My lord knoweth well that the dwellers in the tenement of Ut know not gold." [Pg 218]

"Ah! Ramûa, the flower-seller, is thy mistress' daughter?" demanded Belshazzar, stepping forward a little.

Bazuzu inclined his head.

"Then, Bit-Shumukin, unless the knave lies again, the gods favor thee well. Have her brought to thee, the Lady Ramûa. She is as fair a maid as any in Babylon; and as she has sold thy flowers—let her now pay for them."

Ribâta turned to his friend with interest in his face. "Do you laugh at me, Bit-Shamash, or is this thing so?"

"It is so, Ribâta. Send only for the maid, and see if Bel is not kindly disposed to thee."

"Send for her here? Now? Nay—the knave no doubt lies."

"By my father's throne, I think he does not! The maiden Ramûa is known to me. Have I not passed her daily for months, sitting on the temple steps? Have I not oftentimes worn a handful of flowers bought from her for a *se*, to win a smile from her maiden lips? Br-r! Ribâta! Thou hast the blood of Oannes^[9] in thy veins. Send for her to be brought before thee. She will teach thee the beauty of Sin's bright beams better than I. Buy her, Ribâta, and keep her for thine own. 'Tis those that cannot be bought that make men miserable. Send for this maiden, I tell thee. Brother, I go home."

Finishing this rather cynical advice, Belshazzar turned on his heel and started for the palace. Bit-Shumukin, catching him by the arm, tried all his eloquence to make his friend remain. The prince was obdurate, in his light, self-willed way, and finally concluded the argument by saying:

"Now I will send a slave to thee from the court-yard, who shall go with this man to bring the lady to thee from her dwelling. Quarrel not with thy fate, O son of ingratitude! May Marduk bless the meeting!" [Pg 219]

And thereupon Belshazzar departed and went his way, leaving Ribâta alone with the still trembling slave. By this time Bazuzu was utterly wretched, bitterly angry with himself for speaking Ramûa's name, vaguely hating Belshazzar for his mockery, thoroughly apprehensive of the power of the man who stood at his elbow tentatively regarding him. Fortunately, Belshazzar lost no time in carrying out his own suggestion, and presently a slave of Ribâta's household appeared, coming rapidly down the path from the mansion. Reaching the spot where his master stood, he inclined himself profoundly, and waited his lord's will. After a little hesitation Bit-Shumukin, seeing nothing else to be done, said, in a tone of quiet command:

"Thou, Baniya, must go, in company with this slave here, to the tenement of Ut, across the canal, and bring to me, from her abode, the Lady Ramûa—her, and none other. See that none but you attends or follows her hither. In this place I shall wait for your return. Behold, I have spoken. Hasten to obey."

The slave inclined himself again, and then, driving Bazuzu peremptorily before him, left the garden by a gate that was always fastened on the inside. Once without, the two started together across the bare field leading to the foot-bridge that crossed the canal. Baniya knew the way as well as Bazuzu himself, for the tenement of Ut was one of Ribâta's largest buildings, and any one familiar with the poor quarter of the New Year was sure to know where this house was. Therefore there was no hope of Bazuzu's leading the man astray. There was but one thing that he could do now for Ramûa, and this he tried.

In spite of his ungainliness, which amounted to actual deformity, Bazuzu was a powerful, and, in a way, an agile man. He had come victorious out of more than one brawl, and physical pain meant very little to him. Now, as the two of them came to the edge of the bridge, the black man fell a step behind his companion, and after a second or two darted quickly upon Baniya, seized him about the body, and lifted him high in the air with the intention of flinging him into the canal and then taking to his heels in an opposite direction. But Bazuzu had reckoned on Baniya's losing his head at the crucial instant; and this Baniya did not do. The moment that he was seized, the sinewy little slave twisted one arm from the other's grasp, drew something from his girdle, and struck twice at Bazuzu's brawny shoulder. The black slave uttered a quick cry and dropped his burden. His right arm fell helpless at his side, and the two red streams that had gushed forth from different points in his shoulder, met on the upper arm and flowed in a thick flood down to his hand. [Pg 220]

"Let the slave of the Lady Ramûa guide me quickly to her," observed Baniya, with a grin at the distant moon.

And Bazuzu, thoroughly cowed, made no answer, but started in advance of his companion across the bridge.

The door to the general room of Beltani's *ménage* was open, as Bazuzu had left it an hour before. Across the threshold lay Zor, quietly asleep. From within came the faint, regular sound of Charmides' breathing. Everything was perfectly still. As Bazuzu started to enter the first room, however, Baniya pulled him back, and, once more drawing his knife, breathed softly:

"I will enter that room first, slave, and my knife is in my hand. Thou shalt rouse the Lady Ramûa from her sleep and bring her to me alone. But if any man or any other living thing in this house wakes, know that thou shalt not escape death at my hands. Now heed me!"

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Bazuzu signified his acquiescence by a nod, and presently Baniya was left alone beside Charmides' pallet, while the black man crept on his hands and knees into the other room. Ramûa's bed was near the door. Beltani lay in the far corner, Baba on the other side of the room. Beside Ramûa Bazuzu stopped and knelt down. All three women were asleep. Beltani's light snores brought reassurance to the slave's heart, though the task of waking one of the sleepers in this room without rousing either of the other two seemed, on the face of it, impossible. Nevertheless, Bazuzu must try for his life. Therefore, with the most delicate of touches he laid a finger on Ramûa's forehead. She quivered a little. Her eyes flew open. Then, seeing the strange shadow beside her, she asked, softly:

"What is it? Thou, my Baba?"

Bazuzu, speaking between his teeth in a tone scarcely audible, answered: "It is I, Bazuzu, Lady Ramûa. Rise thou without noise and creep into the outer room. There we may more safely speak."

Forthwith he set the example by starting upon his hands and knees back into the other room, where Baniya waited and the Greek slept.

Ramûa, instinctively dreading her mother, and fearing also the unguessed errand of Bazuzu, implicitly obeyed the words of the slave and made her way skilfully, without the faintest sound, out of her dark sleeping-place into the moonlit living-room. Seeing her, Baniya stepped swiftly forth, causing an exclamation to rise to her lips. Bazuzu stood one side, his head bowed, till Ribâta's slave had insolently examined her, from the pretty head with its loosened hair, down the ragged tunic to her delicately arched feet. Then a slight smile broke over the face of my lord's servant, and he bowed as he whispered:

"Will the Lady Ramûa deign to follow me?"

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Ramûa, who had been regarding the man in mute amazement, now turned quickly round and looked to Bazuzu for some explanation of this astonishing request. Bazuzu, weary, suffering from his wounds, and utterly despairing over Ramûa's impending fate, lowered his head still further.

"Lord Ribâta waits," he muttered.

"Ribâta!" In her terror, Ramûa scarcely whispered the words. She looked wildly from Bazuzu, who had lost all hope, to Baniya, uneasy with impatience. Then, slowly, she turned her eyes to the spot where Charmides lay. He slept. The Greek slept tranquilly on while she passed through this great peril! It was the sight of him there, sunk in oblivion, that suddenly decided Ramûa. That he *could* sleep through this time was an omen that he was not for her. A sudden anger against him rose up in her breast. With her heart full to bursting of tears, of terror, of misery, she started forward into the moonlight, following the footsteps of the swiftly moving slave.

In the mean time my lord, kept up later than he had expected to-night, was trying to amuse himself with the beauties of his unfrequented garden. While he wandered up and down the deserted paths, he could not but muse on the rather curious and entertaining incident of the night. Ribâta was not by nature an ungenerous man; and now, as he looked about him on the extreme beauty of his surroundings, it seemed rather well than otherwise that some one should have had so much benefit from his unheeded flowers. Certainly the plants seemed to have suffered no harm at Bazuzu's hands. Instead, the gardeners had, in all probability, been saved a daily hour or so of labor of the same kind. Then Ribâta pondered for a little on the code of laws that might put a slave to death for just such a deed—something that did no harm to any one, and on the other hand helped a poor family to live. Certainly, for a judge of the royal court, Ribâta was not narrow; neither was he harsh. Presently, as he continued his walk, he came upon the basket still containing a handful of red lilies, lying, as he himself had finally dropped it, beside the rose thicket. Ribâta picked it up, and, as he moved on again, began, half absently, to pluck flowers—such flowers as Bazuzu had never dared take—and to put them into the light receptacle. My lord confessed to himself that his work was not artistically done. Great clumps of jasmine from their carefully trained vines, thick bunches of heliotrope, heavy lotus-blossoms with their rubber-like stalks, golden roses and waxen camellias, the rarest of his garden's lustrous treasures, he pulled and dragged about with his unpractised hands, and threw in a fragrant, tangled heap into Ramûa's basket.

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It was soon filled to overflowing, and then Ribâta went back to the gate through which Baniya must return. Near this was an arbor overgrown with sweet, white flowers, and here he seated himself to wait. He was not impatient. The beauty of this unvisited part of his own domain had made a strong impression on him, and he leaned back comfortably to gaze out upon the moonlight and to dream unwonted dreams. Around and above him the heavy jasmine exhaled its overpowering sweetness into the limpid moonlight. Near him row upon row of brilliant lilies lay like scarlet butterflies asleep. Presently, from a distant thicket, a nightingale began to pour forth its full-throated song; and then, as Ribâta in a quiet ecstasy raised his head to listen, the gate opened, and Ramûa, bare-footed, with flowing hair, came into the garden.

She could not, from where she stopped, see Ribâta; and he, wishing to know her first, did not immediately rise. Baniya, however, broke in upon him by running forward, performing his obeisance, and demanding to know if he had done well. My lord peremptorily dismissed him, and

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then, rising reluctantly, went to the maiden.

"Ramûa is made welcome to Ribâta's dwelling-place," he said, quietly, looking at but not offering to touch her.

Ramûa's reply was to cover her face with her hair, and to fold both hands across her breast, in token of the deepest woe.

Somewhat against his will, Ribâta changed his tactics. Assuming a tone of severity that did not in the least accord with his mood, he said: "And it was you, then, that despatched your slave into my garden, that he might steal my blossoms for your gain?"

The girl fell upon her knees and touched her forehead to the earth. "Alas, my lord! Alas, it is true! My lord, be merciful to me! May my lord grant a little time and he shall be repaid—shall be repaid for all. I will repay him. By day and by night shall my hands labor. I will earn a maneh of silver wherewith to buy new plants for his garden, if he will let me now depart from him. May the great gods put mercy into the heart of my lord!"

Ribâta looked down at her with a smile that she could not see. An honest maid, apparently, yet too pretty to give back to toil and poverty. The solitude, the song of the nightingale, and the intoxicating odors of the jasmine, had put Ribâta into a sentimental mood. He lifted Ramûa in his arms, carried her inside the arbor, and placed her tenderly upon the seat that he had occupied. Then, while she vainly struggled to free herself from his touch, he continued his scrutiny of her face and form.

Ramûa was choking with terror at her position. It seemed to her now that, rather than have come hither, she should have killed herself. Yet Charmides had slept through her trial! Charmides! Doubtless he was sleeping yet. And, unreasonable as it was, that thought angered her anew. Ah! When he did finally awake he would find his world changed for him.

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These bitter thoughts, that occupied her mind even as she strove to hold off from the man at her side, were broken in upon by Ribâta, who plaintively addressed her:

"Lady Ramûa, I have no need for manehs of silver. They are mine in plenty. At the thought that you labored for my sake my heart would be cut with each hour of your work. Nay, maiden, rather than that, I offer you or your mother as many golden manehs as you desire if you, fair one, will become a flower of my garden that shall bloom near me forever. This that is around you now, and my palace yonder, and slaves and silks and perfumes, sandal-wood and frankincense, wines of Helbon and spices from the East, soft couches and embroidered garments, shall be all your own. Come, then, Ramûa! Let us out of the sweet night into my house! And to-morrow shall thy mother be made glad with wealth. Say that thou wilt follow me, my beautiful one!"

Now this offer was a very fair and more than generous one—for the day. There was no insult in it. So much Ramûa knew. And she knew also that it was something that Beltani would have heard with unbounded delight. It was a chance that any girl of her station might regard as a gift from the silver sky. For this reason Ramûa could show neither scorn nor anger. She had no refuge but tears. Weep, however, she certainly did, and to much purpose; for, before the deluge, Ribâta was perfectly helpless. He was also not a little amazed, for he knew no man who had ever been refused such an offer. It was not a little mortifying to his vanity; and as he thought the matter over while still she wept, his temper began to rise. Poor man! He was unaware that he was pitted against a youth with a halo of shining hair, eyes like the summer sky, the physique of a Tammuz, and a voice like the notes of an ivory flute. Even he would scarcely have expected to compete with these things, added, as they were, to the hope, faint though it might be, of an honest marriage with such masculine beauty. But in his ignorance the good man began to regard his rebellious prize with no little impatience.

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"Well, maid," he observed at length, "are these silly tears all thine answer? Hast thou no other word? If so, thou shalt be carried in!"

Then Ramûa, terrified in earnest, repeated, tremulously: "My lord! Have pity! I will work! I will repay the debt! Only, in the name of the great Sin, be merciful!"

"Now is this girl surely a fool!" muttered Bit-Shumukin to himself. "Listen thou, Ramûa! I will take no money from thee."

"Then let my lord take my life," she answered, wearily.

"Gladly!" was the eager reply.

Misunderstanding her entirely, he would have seized her in his arms again, but that the girl, shuddering a little, drew the knife from his belt and pressed it into his hand.

"Ramûa is ready!" she gasped, faintly.

Ribâta uttered an exclamation. "Child! Would I kill thee, thinkest thou?"

She looked up at him stupidly. "Thou hast said it."

Now Ribâta was amazed. Fool she might be, indeed, but she was no coward. He had not thought any woman possessed of such ready courage. Stepping back a little, while she still sat there before him, drooping and silent, he considered the situation. He was not brutal at heart, Bit-Shumukin; and he was too experienced to lose his head through that mad intoxication known only

to youth in its first freedom. Besides this, no woman in all Babylon could have said that he had not been perfectly fair with her. This present matter being, in his wide knowledge, unique, demanded a unique finale. Presently he took up the basket with its rare and fragrant burden, and put it into Ramûa's passive hand.

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"There, my maid, are thy morrow's flowers. Go thy way with them, and sell them as is thy wont. But may it be thy last day upon the steps of the temple of Istar. To-morrow, at sunset, I and my slaves will come to thee in thy dwelling. By then thy heart must be softened towards me. For, as Sin sheds his light from above, I swear that I will have thee for mine own! Go thy way in peace to thy home, and the great gods bring sleep to thine eyelids."

He made way for her to pass; and Ramûa, panting with anxiety to escape, still clinging to her basket, rose and ran from him, swiftly as a deer, to the unfastened gate. Ribâta watched her go, and heard the little sob of relief that she gave as she found Bazuzu, weak from loss of blood and bitter anxiety, awaiting her outside.

So Ribâta, pondering philosophically upon the mysteries of woman-nature, and looking forward with no little interest to the sunset of the morrow, wended his way slowly towards his palace.

VIII BABA

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Next morning, just as the sun rose over the city, Charmides opened his eyes. If ever Charmides could be said to be lighter of heart, brighter of face, and cheerier of spirit at one time than another, it was in the very early day. The smell of the dawn, its peculiar, charming freshness, that penetrates to the very heart of the most crowded city, was as life to his soul. To-day, when he went forth for his solitary stroll by the edge of the canal, the air, unbreathed and dewy as it was, brought him as usual a sense of undimmed delight.

As he walked, scarcely heeding the rows of ungainly flat-boats drawn up along the edge of the canal, or the small army of scavenger-dogs that slept the sleep of the hungry near them, Charmides dreamed. This, indeed, was a matter of course. The morning and the sunlight would have lost half their beauty had not the thought of Ramûa been in his heart. To-day his pure pleasure in her was a little tainted by the impression that last night's revelation had made upon him, in the not very clear sense of right and wrong that it betrayed in her whom he loved. Yet he had absolute confidence in his influence over her; and, as he returned to the house, no premonition of the new trouble disturbed his happy tranquillity.

Upon recrossing the threshold of the outer room an unwonted sight met his eyes. It was still early: so early that neither the girls nor Beltani would, ordinarily, have been about. Yet here was Bazuzu, sitting near the door-way, bare-shouldered, while Baba bent over him, deftly applying a paste of bruised onions and sesame to the two blood-incrusted wounds in the slave's back. Bazuzu sat dumb and patient beneath the gentle hands; but Baba's face was drawn, and the tears rained from her eyes as she worked. Beholding them, Charmides uttered an exclamation:

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"Apollo! What is it, Bazuzu? What has happened?"

There was no answer. Bazuzu did not even look up. Baba gave the Greek a wretched little glance, compressed her lips, and bent over her task again with a stifled sob.

"Baba! Bazuzu! Tell me!"

Still they were silent. But as the rhapsode, more and more bewildered, was about to question them more intelligently, the slave, lifting his eyes for an instant, muttered, indistinctly:

"To him that sleeps too well by night Nebo grants little knowledge."

"Stop, Bazuzu! I will not have thee speak so!" cried Baba, instantly resenting the suggestion.

"What is this that you say?" And Charmides, who had but half caught the slave's words, moved closer to him. Then, suddenly, a new idea struck the rhapsode. His heart shot downward for one sickening instant. Speaking very slowly, out of his dread, he asked: "Ramûa—where is she?"

Baba sobbed again; and Charmides, with a great cry, sprang to her side and laid a fierce hand on the child's shoulder. "Ramûa!—Ramûa! Where is she?"

Baba raised her eyes and made a sidelong gesture towards the door of the other room. Charmides followed the look, and he almost laughed with relief to see Ramûa standing there in the door-way, looking at him. She was just as usual: her hair smoothly coiled and bound about her head with strips of bright cloth; her feet shod with wooden sandals; her ragged tunic fitting her slender figure closely. But Ramûa's eyes were red—far more red than Baba's. She was not, however, weeping now. Charmides thought her tears for Bazuzu, and he went to her with sympathetic phrases on his tongue and comforting tenderness in his heart. It was a shock, then, when she shrank from his approach and turned her head away. Baba, watching them both, read both their hearts; but her tightened lips let no sound escape them.

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By the time that Bazuzu's shoulder was bandaged and bound up, and Charmides, stung to

silence, had seated himself on his bed and bowed his head, Beltani bustled forth from her chamber, her face beaming, her whole manner breathing busy cheerfulness. As she called a loud greeting to Charmides, the youth started up in hopeful astonishment. Beltani was on her way up-stairs to the roof, however, to begin preparations for breakfast; and no one spoke as she left the room. Ramûa seated herself listlessly on Bazuzu's bed, and Baba presently went to her and sat down at her side. Bazuzu, after moving vaguely about for a few minutes, crossed suddenly to the far corner and drew out the basket of flowers, now arranged in small nosegays, and sprinkled, as usual, with fresh water. At sight of them Ramûa gave a faint groan, and Charmides, hearing it, jumped suddenly to his feet, strode across the floor, and confronted the two girls in a manner that showed his temper:

"Baba—Ramûa—I know not my fault. Before I leave you, then, you shall tell me what it has been. Speak to me!"

Ramûa's only reply was to droop her head a little lower; but Baba answered and said: "There is no fault in you, Charmides. Our trouble is not yours."

"What, then, is your trouble? Why is it not mine? Your mother smiles to-day. Is it Bazuzu, then?"

"Nay."

"Then what? What? Will you never tell me?"

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"If thou wouldst know—Ramûa is to be sold to-day—at a goodly price. Therefore our mother smiles."

Baba spoke in a stupid, matter-of-fact tone, and Charmides heard her stupidly. "Ramûa to be sold!" he repeated. "Ramûa to—be—RAMÛA!" he shouted. "RAMÛA! Speak to me! Apollo! My lord! Tell me what this thing is! Tell me that this woman speaks lies to me! Apollo!"

As understanding finally came home to him, he broke into his own tongue. Ramûa's gentle, dog-like eyes were lifted for an instant only to his. In her glance Baba's words were corroborated. Charmides knew from her look that the thing was true. Then he suddenly went forward and took her into his arms.

"Ramûa," he said, brightly, "I love thee. Thou shalt be my wife."

Then at last her resignation was broken through, and she caught him wildly about the neck. Clinging to him, she gave forth a long, wailing sob that seemed to have no end. Baba, white and choked, moved from her place and aimlessly crossed the room to where Bazuzu crouched, nervously twisting a rosebud in his hand. Tight and yet more tightly Charmides held her whom he loved; and in that close embrace peace came upon them both. It would take more strength than my Lord Ribâta had to part these two now.

At this juncture some one came upon the scene—not Ribâta, but Beltani. At the sight that met her eyes her harsh face lost its light, and Charmides was made aware of her presence by a stinging blow on the back of the neck. With the strength of a strong man she tore him away from Ramûa's close embrace, thrust the girl back upon Bazuzu's pallet, and lifted her hand again to strike the Greek in the face. Charmides caught her by the wrist. Then they confronted each other, the wide, blue eyes blazing into the small, glittering, black ones. The woman's look did not falter. She seemed to have in her no sense of shame. Then Charmides, suddenly flinging her off from him, spoke two words in such a tone as he never again used towards a woman:

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"Thou fiend!"

For a second Beltani cringed; but she recovered herself. With an unconcern that to the rhapsode was incomprehensible, she presently said, addressing the room generally:

"The food is ready. If any would eat, let him come up-stairs." Then, turning on her heel again, she retreated to the roof.

Not a single one of the four left behind her, disregarded the summons. Such was Beltani's peculiar power. Baba, Bazuzu, and Ramûa, went from fear. Charmides followed them, out of a sense of prudence—the prudence which told him that Ramûa could only be protected if he were permitted to remain in the household. He knew also that her one chance of escape was through him; as perhaps her single desire to escape was on his account. Therefore, with a superhuman effort, he forced himself to bland attention to Beltani throughout the meal, during which the entire story of the adventures of the past night was recounted at length. Charmides' horror at what Ramûa had been through was equalled by his shame and self-reproach at having slept while she, with Bazuzu and Baniya, had stood almost at his side. He made no comments on the tale. Only, when Beltani concluded her recital with the information that at sunset on this very day Ribâta would come in person to bring the gold and to take Ramûa away, Charmides, seeing the girl's shiver of dread, met her look with a smile that sent the first glow of hope back to her heart. The Greek had made a very simple and feasible plan, as it seemed to him. Ramûa would go forth that morning as usual with her flowers, while he would set out towards the temple of Sin. But at nightfall, when Ribâta arrived at the tenement Ut, with his manehs of gold to exchange for a soul, Ramûa, for the first evening of her life, would not be under her mother's roof. Rather he, Charmides, her husband, would keep her out in the city, wherever he chose to lodge, rightfully and lawfully, and with her full consent; for there was no doubt that the priest of Sin would be quite willing to tie the marriage-cord about their wrists for such a sum as the Greek could afford

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to pay out of the still unemptied bag of his father.

Truly it was a pretty scheme, and an easy—so obviously easy, indeed, that it happened to occur to Beltani also, and she so arranged matters that Baba was detailed to sell the flowers on the steps of the temple of Istar, while Ramûa remained at home under her mother's eye. When, at the usual hour for the departure of the workers, this forethought was displayed, Charmides began to realize his helplessness. There seemed nothing to do but to go forth as usual to the temple, to do his work there, to fill out the day as he might, and to trust to the love of Apollo to preserve her whom he loved from the fate that hung over her. Between now and sunset were ten round hours. Cities had been taken in less time than that, did one but know how to set about it. But there was the rub. The only thing that seemed left to do—go to Ribâta himself with an appeal—was a manifest absurdity. Charmides knew enough of Babylonish character for that. And even had Ribâta's reputation as a roué and a roisterer not been what it was, still, the notion that he could be prevented by a mere nobody from acquiring a beautiful slave in such a simple manner, was something that a man of Charmides' own race would never have thought of. Ramûa knew this as well as Charmides. She said good-bye to him in the door-way of the tenement Ut, her mother beside her, and Baba just behind. There was no more than a long look and his miserable whisper:

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"At sunset I will be here."

He knew that she quivered at the mere mention of that hour. Then he turned abruptly away, and she could only watch him go.

Charmides went straight from the bank of the canal to the temple of Sin, by a much shorter way than that that held so many happy memories for him. He must accustom himself now to take his walk in solitude. Never before, however, had he realized what a dreary distance it was. The city lay about him, spread out in all its filth, ill-kept, teeming with naked, half-starved children, noisy with mongrel dogs, rattling with buffalo-carts. He saw to-day only the wretchedest and ugliest sights. His own heart responded to the wails of every child throughout the endless walk; but he reached the temple a half-hour before his usual time.

The mercy-hour had not yet come. A sacrifice, however, was in progress, and the officiating priest called to him to play while the augurs began their work. He saw the goat quartered and its flesh cooked, while the entrails, which had been removed, were carefully examined for any special omen of good or of evil for him who offered the sacrifice. When this was over the Greek retired alone to the sanctuary, where, from the sacred image, he was to listen to the complaints of those that came to seek aid in trouble. How vain that quest was he knew too well. Yet, because this was a consecrated place, the Greek knelt to his own fair god, and prayed as a man prays once in his life, for Ramûa, her honor, and his happiness.

When finally a priest came to him and opened the door in the back of the statue, Charmides' heart was a little lighter. He ascended quickly into his place, where he could look through the eyes of the god and speak through its mouth to those who knelt before it. Presently came a woman with a sick child in her arms. No conjurer had been able to help her, no god would take pity on her. Charmides told her a charm that could not fail, mentioned the price of the information, and sent her away. Then followed in rapid succession a stream of men and women, each with a tale of misery. By this time the Greek knew the types by heart, and, while he pitied, he was wearied by them. Which of them all had a heart as sore as his to-day? Alas! Could they have known that their god himself stood in the shadow of despair's black wings, would they have departed from him serene in faith, and so confident in their new-found wisdom?

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However, when half the allotted mercy-time was over, there came one suppliant who, for a moment, took the Greek's thought from himself. A man, entirely muffled in a dark mantle, his head covered with such a cloth as desert-travellers wear, entered the secluded place before the statue, prostrated himself thrice before it, finally lifted his head, and, throwing the embroidered cloth back from his face, clasped his hands in the attitude of abject supplication. Charmides started to find himself gazing into the deep-blue eyes of Belshazzar, the prince royal.

"May Sin look mercifully upon me from the high place," began the suppliant, according to the ritual.

"Mercifully looks Sin upon them that approach him with humble hearts."

"Father Sin, bring peace to my heart!"

"Child of Sin, peace is to thee."

"Hear thou the woe of my spirit. Heal me, and guard me from pain."

"I hear thee. Speak."

Here the suppliant began in his own words, and Charmides listened eagerly to him; for Belshazzar, priest as he was by birthright, was not often to be found at the mercy-seat of a god in whom, in his own heart, he could have no faith. How far he had been initiated into the monstrous deceits of the church, however, the Greek could not tell. And he now spoke with a humility of which Charmides had not deemed him capable.

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"Great Sin, lord of men, father of Ishtar the divine, hear and pity me! Tell me, I beseech, wherein I have angered the great gods? I have offended my goddess. With me my goddess is exceeding wroth. I kneel down before the gate-way of the temple of Istar, and am not admitted to her. I am

become unholy in her eyes. I may no more pass over the threshold of Ê-Âna. The Lady Istar knows me not. O god, her father, hear my prayer, that I may learn how I shall placate the great goddess thy child! How may I again in peace behold her? Bring answer, O god, to my prayer!"

Once more Belshazzar touched his brow to the floor, while Charmides watched him in amazement. For the moment he forgot to listen to the prompting words of the priest at his elbow. But when, after half a phrase, the fellow stopped and was silent, Charmides turned to look at him, and remained fixed in astonishment. The under-priest was in the throes of a frenzy such as the Greek had never seen before. Belshazzar, kneeling below, waited anxiously for his answer, while the oracle could only stand there, helplessly, looking at the priest who trembled and shook so violently that his joints were threatened with dislocation. Presently, after a long stillness, when the suppliant had become not a little impatient, there came from the mouth of the Zicari words that were not of his making, spoken in a deep and sonorous voice with which Charmides was quite unfamiliar:

"Belshazzar, be not disturbed. The heart of Istar undergoeth change. Thine hath she been; thine will be. In time, of her own will, she will seek thine aid. Then, by the might of thine arm, shalt thou protect her; and cherish her unto the end. Yet a little while and that end cometh for both. Therefore go forth in peace, and wait her will."

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Silence followed these words, and Belshazzar, trembling with strange emotion, touched his brow to the floor, and rose, and went his way. Charmides turned from him back to the priest, who stood beside him in a normal attitude, and said, presently:

"Reply thus to the suppliant: 'Thou must sacrifice to the Lady Istar, in her temple, fifty fat oxen and one hundred goodly lambs. By this shalt thou be brought back into the favor of Istar, the child of my heart. Sin hath spoken. Arise. Go thy way.'"

And Charmides, wondering more and more, repeated the words, as he was bidden, to the empty air. The temple of Istar had lost a hecatomb; but Belshazzar had, perhaps, been won to faith in his native gods.

At the end of the mercy-hour the Greek left the temple as usual, and went forth into the streets. He did not turn to the square of Istar. It were too miserably empty for him to-day. Rather he set off in another direction, wandering drearily along. And how the long hours of noon and the afternoon slipped away, he hardly knew. His unhappiness took no heed of time; for, all of a sudden, time had become worthless to him. It was just one hour to sunset when he turned his steps southward towards the canal of the New Year.

Meantime, while the Greek had wandered through unfamiliar quarters of the city, Baba had sat all day on the steps of the temple of Istar, with Ramûa's flowers in her lap. Of the three young people who passed those unhappy hours in brooding over the general misfortune, it was the youngest that endured most, and had suffered most acutely. Baba had to review the situation of her family always hopelessly for herself, sometimes not without hope for the cause of her sister and Charmides. Child as she was, Baba loved Charmides with a love to the heights of which Ramûa could not have risen. For, for the happiness of him whom she loved, the woman-child was willing to renounce him, to give him up to another, though by that act her own life was spoiled forever. From the first moment of seeing Ramûa and Charmides together, she, with the quick perception of one who loves unloved, had foreseen the end. Never once, after the night of their first meal on the roof of the tenement, had she rebelled at this fact. Her resignation was absolute. It had even been a little comfort to her to dream of her sister's happiness, of the wedded home in which she, Baba, might hold a definite place. That she might continue to see Charmides, and to hear his voice day by day, was all that she had asked. But now it seemed that this, too, might be taken from her. She saw Ramûa, a slave, secluded deep in the labyrinth of Ribâta's inaccessible palace; Charmides departed, in his grief, back to his dim, distant home; herself and her mother left alone, to toil through the endless days, living only on the memories of a doubtful happiness that was hopelessly gone.

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It was at this juncture in her imaginings that Baba began to rebel. Ribâta should not have her sister, though he perished by her own hand there in the tenement of Ut. This resolve she made at a little past noon; and she looked up from the vow to find my Lord Ribâta about three feet away, regarding her.

"By Nebo, maid," said he, "thou art not she who came last night into my garden!"

"Nay, verily, lord."

"Yet these be the flowers that my hands plucked for her who becomes mine to-day. Who art thou, girl?"

"Baba, I," was the answer, as the child lifted her elfin face and dog-like eyes to the man.

"Baba! And she—the pretty one—is Ramûa. What is she to thee?"

"A sister."

"Ah! And you sell her flowers while she waits at home for me! Then give me of my roses, Baba, and I will pay for them."

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As he spoke, he picked two crimson-petalled blossoms from the tray, tossed a shekel into the

girl's lap, and passed on, laughing, while Baba stared after him, just realizing the opportunity that had come—and gone. Had she only killed him as he stood before her there, with the little weapon that she carried always in her girdle, who, in the excitement of the moment, would have thought of her family? She would have been carried off at once before the royal judges, have been speedily condemned, and probably taken straight from the court to her death. But to kill Ribâta in the tenement was a different matter. It would implicate every member of her family: Charmides, as well as Ramûa and her mother. Undoubtedly some desperate chance must be run to-day, but how or when Baba did not know. It would probably be left for the exigencies of the sunset hour.

That hour was approaching. Baba watched it come, dreading it as much as did Charmides, and more than Ramûa. Ramûa, indeed, had been singularly dull all day. The grief that she suffered was not poignant. It was as heavy and as lustreless as only despair can be. The fact that this was her last day of youth, of freedom, of love, of maidenhood, her last day in her home, the last day, in fine, of the life she had been born to, was something that overwhelmed her completely, and made sharp realization impossible. She followed her mother obediently about the house. She bathed the wounds of Bazuzu, who hid his face from her touch. And the only tears that she shed were over Zor, Baba's goat, which had stayed at home to-day, and had eaten its noon meal from her hand. At the touch of the creature's tongue Ramûa gave way for a few seconds. But she recovered herself quickly, and presented an impassive face when, a few minutes later, her mother came down from the roof.

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Ramûa also watched the sun; but in her case it was more to know when she might be expecting Charmides than anything else. Baba and the Greek arrived somewhat before the time, within five minutes of each other. Baba had a scolding because four of the flower bouquets remained in her basket unsold. She made her peace by producing Ribâta's silver shekel, forbearing, however, to tell who had bestowed it upon her. After this little, indecisive skirmish, there was stillness in the lower room of the tenement of Ut. All the family, Zor included, were gathered there together. Ramûa sat at Baba's side on one of the beds. Beltani knelt near the door-way, grinding sesame in a mortar. The slave Bazuzu wove on at his baskets; while Zor lay comfortably at the feet of Charmides, who, very pale and silent, sat on his pallet on the darkest side of the room.

The sun reached the horizon line—and passed it. The evening flung out her victorious banners of purple, crimson, and gold. Still no Ribâta. Ramûa lifted her head at short intervals, to look across the empty space that stretched out from the open door. Charmides' heart palpitated so that breathing became difficult. There seemed to be a hope on which he had not calculated. Ribâta might have repented of his bargain and not come for the girl. This idea occurred to Beltani also, perhaps, for presently she rose from her labor, set the grain-jar aside, and hurried out of the door to look down the lane towards the canal. When she re-entered the room the look of smug satisfaction on her face was easy to read. Charmides' heart ceased to beat as she bustled over to Ramûa, stood her up, examined her with the greatest care from head to heels, fastened in a flying lock, saw that her poor tunic was straight, and that the garland on her head contained no withered leaf—for this might be considered a most unfortunate omen. She was still fingering her daughter when there was a clatter of yellow wheels outside, a prancing of glossy steeds on the hard pavement, and Ribâta, in his most resplendent chariot, drew rein at the door of the tenement of Ut.

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Beltani's pride knew no bounds. She saw in her heart how every soul in the neighborhood was eagerly peering out from its corner to look at her door, where, this time, no mere steward-collector of rent had stopped, but my lord of them all, in golden attire, was come to pay them a visit. As he dismounted from the vehicle and entered the room, Beltani was nearly on her knees to him, though Ramûa, from her dark and shadowy corner, shrank back as far as she could. Charmides, scowling bitterly, and so pale that his face made a white spot in the gloom where he sat, clenched his two fists, but made no sound. Bazuzu's fingers dropped from his work, while he craned his neck to examine the enemy.

Ribâta saluted his hostess in his most elegant manner, asked carefully after her welfare, wished her health and fortune in the name of Bel-Marduk, and then casually, without too much interest, inquired for the object of his quest.

"The fair one, the Lady Ramûa, the flower of my heart, let mine eyes behold her, O mother of lilies!" said he, with a manner that matched his words.

"Ramûa!" called Beltani, gently—"Ramûa, greet thy lord!"

The girl, trembling like a frightened rabbit, the fire of despair burning in her large eyes, rose from her place and came haltingly down the room. Never, perhaps, had she been more beautiful than in this wretched hour. Charmides knew it. Ribâta, who watched her every move, gave perceptible signs of pleasure. Bowing before her as he might have bowed to the queen of Babylon, he lifted one of her cold and unresisting hands to his lips. It had scarcely reached them when, with a suddenness that startled Ribâta, Ramûa's hand was snatched away. She was pushed violently backward, and my Lord Bit-Shumukin found himself eye to eye with Charmides of Doric Selinous.

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The Greek was choking with rage, with excitement, with biting jealousy. For a moment after his act he could not speak. Ribâta regarded him with frowning amazement. He said nothing, however, till Charmides, with a convulsive breath, opened his lips and began, very quietly:

"My Lord Ribâta—"

"Knavel!" thundered my lord, finding his voice. "Out of my way!" He lifted his hand to strike, but Charmides rather nonplussed him by awaiting the blow without a movement. He merely stood, white-faced and unflinching, looking Ribâta in the eyes.

"My Lord Ribâta," he repeated, still more gently, "I beg you as a man, as one of the judges of the Great City, to hear me. This lady whom you would purchase for gold to be your slave is my promised wife."

"Are you wedded?" asked Ribâta, quickly.

"No, no, no!" screamed Beltani, shrilly, hurrying forward.

"No," admitted Charmides, with that extreme of calm that held Ribâta's attention in spite of himself. "No. She is but my promised wife."

"He lies, my lord!"

"But can I see her whom I love taken from me without one word? Nay, verily, it must be over a lifeless body that Ramûa goes to you."

It was all the plea that Charmides could make; yet perhaps it had stood him in good stead if Beltani had not been there. She, flashing-eyed and furiously angry, cried loudly:

"My lord! My lord! This man lies! He is no suitor to my daughter. She shall not call him lord though you cast her away. I say it, and I am her mother. Behold, he came a stranger into my house, and I sheltered and fed him. Thus does he repay the charity. My lord, wilt thou take Ramûa?" [Pg 243]

Ribâta listened to her quite as attentively as to Charmides. The situation puzzled him not a little. Many and varied as his experiences had been, he had never met with one like this. His official nature, as one of the judges of the royal court, came up and stood him in good stead now. Having heard both sides of the case, he turned, for corroboration of the one or the other, to the principal factor in the whole matter—Ramûa herself.

"Maid, what sayest thou to all this? Wilt thou come to me in peace, and willingly?" he asked.

Ramûa's answer was not encouraging to his hopes. She moved forward a little, still trembling, the sudden hope of release lighting up her gray pallor. She did not reply to the question in words, but sank to her knees on the floor at Ribâta's feet, her hands upraised and clasped, the pleading in her face too easy to read. Not Beltani's daughter, this.

Ribâta gazed at her in pronounced admiration. Suddenly he coughed, turned on his heel, and began to pace up and down the narrow space before the door, head bent, brows contracted. Charmides knew well enough all that was in his heart, but he mightily feared the outcome of the debate. Nevertheless, the very fact that there could be a debate considerably raised Ribâta in his estimation. Even as he thought, Charmides prepared himself for a further and greater struggle. If Ribâta decided against him, if Ramûa went forth with the man, it should be, as he himself had said, over his, Charmides', dead body. Therefore he quietly loosened from its place the short, broad knife that had travelled with him from home, and with this in his right hand, lying along the under-side of his wrist, he stood leaning against the door, watching the death of the bright sunset in the west, the gay chariot with its rearing horses in front of the door, and, finally, the group in the room with him. No one spoke. Ribâta alone moved. [Pg 244]

At length my lord's head gave a quick jerk, and he turned briskly towards Beltani:

"Mother of fair women, is thy daughter Ramûa ready to follow me? There lie in my chariot certain bags of golden coin that I have brought for thee; not that these could be any payment for a thing so priceless as thy child; but they shall go to show the love that I bear thee for her sake."

Beltani grew radiant. Here, certainly, was no indetermination. "Ramûa!" she cried. "Go thou instantly to my lord! He will take thee into the land of happiness."

Ramûa obeyed her mother's words by moving swiftly to Charmides' side, laying one light hand on his arm, and saying, quietly: "Behold my lord! Him will I follow forever, into Mulge and Ninkigal, or up to the silver sky, as Marduk decrees."

Charmides, looking into her face, smiled at her with his soul in his eyes. Then he turned again to Ribâta. "My lord," he said, "thou hearest. Thou wilt not take her from her heart; and her heart is with me."

"By Nebo and Bel, I will take her!" cried Ribâta, furious at last. "Do I not buy her? She is my chattel. You, foreigner, can, at my word, be slain like a dog!" With a heavy stride, and a mien that had more than menace in it, he strode over to where Ramûa stood cowering at Charmides' shoulder.

He had put out his arm to grasp her, and the knife became visible in Charmides' hand, when suddenly there was a faint exclamation from the other end of the room, and a little figure came running forward, and projected itself in a heap at Ribâta's feet.

My lord paused and looked down into an elflike face, with a pair of wide-open, black eyes, and a [Pg 245]

little mouth of rosy hue, parted just so as to show a row of snowy teeth. Masses of unbound hair hung loosely around her head and neck. Beneath her tattered vestment the lines of a remarkably graceful little body could be discerned. Ribâta, looking at her steadfastly for a moment, found something in her face that caused his own to relax its unpleasant expression.

"Thou art—Baba—!" he said, with a recognizable imitation of her way of speaking, and an ensuing grin at his success.

"My lord remembers!" said Baba, with every appearance of coquettish delight.

Ribâta laughed as he touched a scarlet rose on his embroidered tunic. "I remember—sprite," he said.

"My lord, I am Baba, the sister of Ramûa. I have no lover nor husband. Behold, were my lord to ask it, I am my lord's. Let him take me in Ramûa's place for half the gold that he offers for her!"

Ribâta, Beltani, Ramûa, most of all Charmides, stared at Baba in open amazement at her shameless suggestion. All of them judged her exactly according to her words. Only one in the room guessed at the real reason for this unparalleled act, and he, knowing that reason, wept and loved her. Bazuzu, who had long ago realized the great, concealed sorrow in her life, was capable now of appreciating her unbounded devotion, and in his secret heart he hated Ramûa for the innocent part that she played in this pitiable drama.

Ribâta, his thoughts quite turned out of their angry channel, looked for a long time down into the lively, witchlike face, and finally a smile parted his severe lips.

"Good Beltani, hearest thou thy daughter?"

"My lord, I have heard her," returned the woman, in a subdued fashion, not sure that Baba had not found the real solution of their difficult problem.

"And thy words, woman?"

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"May my lord accomplish his will," she replied, disclaiming all further responsibility.

My lord, who by this time began to find himself not absolutely certain of his will, bit his lip and looked thoughtfully from Baba to Ramûa, and back again. The goat-girl sat at his feet, curled up like a kitten, her eyes staring unwinkingly into his face, her lips pressed together in apparent anxiety. Her whole *ensemble* struck Ribâta as peculiarly pleasing. Ramûa was hiding her face from his gaze, and certainly her figure was not so graceful as that of her sister. Baba was not pretty, in the correct sense of the word; but Baba, he felt, would not weep for another in his presence.

"Straighten thy garments, bold one, and rise up. Thou shalt come with me," he said, suddenly, with a half shrug of the shoulders.

Ramûa quivered, whether with delight or displeasure she scarcely knew. At any rate, it was not to Baba that she turned. Baba was strange to her, all of a sudden; was some one to pity, perhaps, but also to be ashamed for. Her good-bye to her sister was reluctant and very gentle, but not warm. Beltani, satisfied, now that one daughter had found wealth and the other a husband, kissed her little one light-heartedly. Black Bazuzu pressed his lips to each of her bare feet, feeling her quite as worthy of the homage as his sovereign could be. Last of all, on her way out of the house of her childhood, Baba passed Charmides. His blue eyes looked into hers for an instant with an expression of puzzled distaste. She had won for him his life's happiness. This was all his thanks. Baba knew his mind, and a dull, half-human smile crept over her face—a smile that Ribâta would not have thought pretty had he been watching her just then. On the threshold of the door, however, Zor was standing; and as she perceived her goat, which she had always loved better than she loved herself, she suddenly seized the creature by its silken hair and gave it a wrench that drew from Zor a long bleat of indignation. Ribâta, catching this proceeding on the part of his new possession, laughed deeply. Here, at last, was something original.

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Day had crept in upon Baba in her new home before, at last, she could turn her face to the wall of her luxurious prison-house, and wail out her little agony alone, in the pale, golden light of the new dawn.

IX BABYLON BY NIGHT

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Baba's departure into her new life left an unexpectedly large gap in the household of the tenement. The child's personality had been very strong; and though she had been little heard, little seen even, she had been much felt. Charmides especially found this true. He had always believed, when he played and sang for himself at home, that Ramûa's presence had given him the support of understanding and sympathy. He was scarcely willing to admit, even to himself, that, in the absence of Baba, the pleasure of improvisation had materially lessened. Baba's action in going to Ribâta he still misunderstood. But as time passed and the want of her was as strong as ever, she came gradually to assume in his mind a place that she had dreamed of filling but had

never hoped to attain.

Though Baba was at liberty to visit her home, if she chose, during the four or five hours at mid-day, when her lord would never demand her presence, she had the strength to withstand the temptation, knowing that by such visits her unhappiness would be greater than ever. Her homesickness was pitiable enough. She managed to conceal it from the eyes of the curious very well. Her tears would never flow when any one was near. But by day and by night the iron entered into her soul; and as day followed day, the weight of the hours past, and yet more the presage of those to come, crushed her spirit with a merciless slowness. Baba was too young to realize the healing power of time, how it bears forgetfulness on its kindly wings, how its shadow becomes finally a shield by which the keen daggers of remembrance are blunted and turned aside. She did not know that the human soul can suffer only so far. Her capacity seemed infinite. She appeared to have entered into an eternally dreary land, the boundless valley of shadow. She wept till tears were gone. Day renewed the misery that night confirmed. Finally, when she had come to dream wildly of death as the one desirable thing, the limit of her unhappiness was reached and the tide turned. The beginning of the change for the better was made by the appearance of Zor, her beloved goat, who had mourned for her mistress so continually that life in the neighborhood with her became impossible, and finally Bazuzu carried the creature to the gates of Ribâta's palace, and commanded the magnificent slaves of the portal to carry it instantly to the Lady Baba. The Lady Baba being, at the moment, an unconscious but none the less real power in my lord's household, Bazuzu was obeyed with alacrity, and the eunuch that led the animal into the court-yard, where Baba lay alone upon her cushions, could only stand in open-mouthed astonishment to see that lady run forward, screaming with delight, throw her arms about the animal's neck, and clasp it to her heart with a warmth that my lord had never discovered in her.

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Zor herself baaed with joy; and, having completely forgotten the anything but affectionate parting of two weeks before, put her nose to her mistress' cheek and loudly sounded her pleasure.

Baba always remembered this meeting as the first ray of light in her gloomy existence. Little by little, now, the luxury of her new home began to grow more worthy in her eyes, when she contrasted it with the squalor of her childhood's home. Little by little, as the feeling of silken garments became more familiar, she lost the craving for her rags, and the hair that could fall in unrebuked tangles round her face. The courts, the halls, and the rooms of Ribâta's beautiful abode, no longer looked vast, barren, and tomblike to her eyes. Ribâta himself was not an object of terror now. He had always been gentle, always kind, with her. This, long ago, she had begun to realize. And now, at length, a visit to the tenement began to seem possible—desirable. Bazuzu, indeed, had come to see her more than once, to bring her her mother's love, and to say that she and Ramûa would see her as soon as she could come. Ramûa was very busy and very happy. Her wedding with Charmides was to be celebrated before the first rains of Tasritû (September), and it was now well along in Ulûlu, the last of summer. Baba heard the news without surprise, but determined to wait till the knot was tied before she went back to see her home.

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The time came soon enough. It was not quite three months after the Greek's first sight of the Great City that he took up that city as his abode for life, bound to it by every tie that can bind a man to his home. Throughout his wedding-day, with its quaint ceremonies and its high feasting, Charmides' mind was upon his mother and her distant land. Could she only know his wife, see her for an hour, behold her pretty gentleness, and read her great love for him, Charmides felt that Heraia would rejoice with him. But, as it was, through this, the most important day of his life, the youth was rather silent and grave, save when Ramûa looked at him with her shy, inquiring smile.

The wedding ceremony was long and fatiguing. It meant prayer and purification in the morning before the assembled images of the gods. Then there was the procession to the nearest temple, the signing of contracts, the giving of Ramûa's hard-won dower by Beltani, and Charmides' reverent pledge to support, protect, and cherish his wife so long as she should remain faithful to him. Then his wrist and hers were bound together with a woollen cord, a prayer was chanted, there was a great blare of trumpets and clashing of cymbals, a public proclamation that Charmides had taken unto himself Ramûa, the daughter of Beltani of the tenement of Ut, and then, at last, the sacrifice. The chief portion of the animals slaughtered was carried to the house of the bride for the wedding feast, which lasted as long as the food held out.

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Not till early evening did Charmides find himself alone. The guests had departed, and Ramûa and her mother were up-stairs in the little room that Charmides had taken for Ramûa and himself on the top floor of the tenement. The Greek seated himself on a stool in the door-way of the living-room, watching the sunset, that poured, a river of living gold, over the lane and square before him. The thought of Sicily and his family there was with him still; and he tried, for a little while, to be alone by the sea with his parents and his brother. With all his soul he prayed to Apollo for happiness in the new life, for forgiveness of any past wrong, for a blessing for his wife, and a continuous renewal of their love for each other. Then between him and Ramûa came the thought of little Baba. Her life was dishonorable, despicable, in his eyes; yet it was she that had saved him either from a great crime or the loss of that that was dearest to him. Did she know of her sister's wedding? If she knew, why had she not come to it? There was no telling. But, in any case, he thought of her very kindly to-night, as he sat alone with the gathering dusk.

Charmides' head was bent with abstraction and he was no longer looking at the square before

him. Presently a four-footed creature ran against his knee and laid its head there. He looked up quickly, to find Zor at his side and Baba in the square. She came towards him through the twilight like a wraith, in her trailing, silken garments, with her hair piled up on her small head in a crown of black braids fastened with wrought golden pins. Beneath the dark hair her face looked very pale and pointed. It was infinitely different from the face he had known. There was no longer anything of the child in it. The elf-look was gone. In its place was an expression of gentle weariness, of patience, of long-suffering that affected the Greek strangely. As she came closer he looked her full in the eyes, and, with one of his old, shining smiles, held out both hands to her.

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Baba had steeled herself to meet any greeting, but this was the one that came nearest to breaking down her self-control. She managed to answer the look steadily; and no one, least of all Charmides, could have dreamed how her heart was bleeding. She gave him her hands, and he saw what she carried in one of them.

"For Ramûa's bridal," she said, placing on his knee a long, golden chain of Phœnician workmanship. It was far more valuable than anything Ramûa had dreamed of possessing; and Charmides, examining the fine work on the metal links, said so to her.

Baba dropped her eyes. "It was from my lord to me," she said. "But it is my hand that brings it to Ramûa. Thou wilt let her wear it—for me—Charmides?" The tone was doubtful.

Much as he might not have desired it, the Greek could not refuse her. "Ramûa is above. Go thou and make thy costly gift to her thyself, Baba."

Baba bent her head, accepting the dismissal with the unquestioning obedience that she had had instilled into her all her life through. While she mounted to her sister, to hear the tale of that sister's perfect happiness, Charmides sat him down again, the current of his thoughts quite changed; his dreams all of the new life, no longer of the old.

One week and then another passed away. The rains had come upon the land, and all Babylon rejoiced that the fiery summer was over. Wonderful and terrifying were these rains. Sometimes, for six hours at a stretch, the skies would open wide, and all the waters of the upper air descend upon the earth in such floods that, by the time they had passed away, and Ramân and his demons ceased to scourge the souls in Ninkigal, Babylon would lie quivering in mud, her brick huts melted into shapeless puddles, her drains overflowing with water and refuse, her river tearing along through its high-bricked banks, threatening to inundate all Chaldea, from Cutha to the gulf. And yet—one short day of sunshine and the Â-Ibur and all the squares were dry again; the canals flowed soberly between their banks; the troops of beggars, children, and dogs came out from their lurking-places, and homeless ones gathered their scant furniture out of the muddy ruins and began the yearly task of rebuilding their unstable homes.

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The days were growing short, and Charmides, whose work at the temple occupied more time than formerly, while his salary had correspondingly increased, frequently walked home at the very end of twilight. One evening, during the first days of Arah-Samma (October), the young Greek, who had been detained by a special sacrifice in honor of the full moon, was wending his way homeward by its light. His steps were slower than usual and betrayed the reluctance that he felt. His mood was arbitrary. For the first time since his marriage, for the first time in his life, perhaps, Charmides felt a great craving for masculine society. The idea of the eternal supper with Ramûa and her mother, the evening spent in hearing his wife discourse upon effeminate matters, or in poetry of his own making, palled upon him. Were there a single man in all this city whom he could call comrade, Ramûa might have waited for him in vain to-night. So at least thought Charmides, as he loitered along in childish ill-humor; and either Sin or Apollo must have read his heart. Presently, as he came to a turn in the way, he espied, just emerging from a door on the left, a whilom familiar figure, bandy-legged, crook-shouldered, with spotless white cap and tunic, and a walk by which he would have been recognized at the end of the world. Without perceiving Charmides, he turned towards the south. But the Greek, his heart leaping with pleasure, darted forward and grasped the little fellow by the shoulder.

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"Hodo!" he cried, in Phœnician. "Hodo! Dost thou forget me?"

"By Nebo, my little Greek!" shouted Hodo, blinking violently once or twice, and then opening his eyes wide with delight. "Well, my Greek! Still in Babylon? And how? And where? I will turn my steps in the way of thy going."

"They go in mine already. Come you home with me, Hodo, and greet my wife."

"Wife—*wife!* Horns of Bel! Why, Greek, thou art the wonder of my heart! 'Home'—to thy 'wife'! Who may she be? Thou hast not won the goddess over?"

Charmides flushed, but did not lose his temper. "Come you home and eat of my bread, and behold the light of Ramûa's eyes."

"Oh, ay. Give you thanks. I will in happiness break bread with you. Then, later, come you out with me where I am going—to the temple of the false Istar. Let us behold the witches who wander abroad; the vultures that snatch at the bodies of the fallen in the pale beams of Sin; and the vampires and ghouls that haunt the Great City by night. The Lady Ramûa will sleep soundly enough for this only time."

Charmides laughed blithely. "Verily, 'tis what I would do, Hodo. Babylon by day I know all too well. But Babylon by night—often have I heard of the Îgigî and the bat companions of Mulge.

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Together we shall behold them. Now yonder is the tenement of Ut, wherein I dwell."

"Aha! Near to Ribâta's palace. Is thy wife awaiting thee?"

"It is Ramûa in the door-way there, with the jar upon her head."

"By Nebo and Bel, a slender lass!"

As the two men arrived at the door Charmides introduced his wife to his friend; and Ramûa, for Charmides' sake, greeted the grotesque little creature with cordial if modest hospitality. Beltani hurried forth to purchase a river-fish from the nearest vender, and this was hastily cooked for supper, along with the usual sesame. These things, and the milk, figs, and dates, they ate indoors; for, though the moon still shone brightly, none could say that in fifteen minutes a hurricane might not be raging. Ramân was fickle, and, in the rainy season, he was the supreme god of the skies.

Hodo seated himself delightedly at Charmides' table. Here, indeed, thought he, was a miracle: that a fellow scarcely attained to manhood, ignorant of every detail of the life and the language of a people also new to him, should have entered the gates of the greatest city in the world, and in four months find himself master of a household, earning a creditable income, and should at the same time have won for a wife one of the most delightful young women that the little Borsipite had ever seen. Ramûa, in fact, with one long-lashed glance, had completely conquered him. The crooked little man forgot his food in the interest of observing what went on around him; and only by the noble efforts of Beltani was the conversational ball kept moving, however fitfully and unevenly. Ramûa, shy and a little nervous at this first tax on her young matronhood, said almost nothing, but managed that Bazuzu should keep every plate and cup filled without putting too severe a strain on the diminutive larder. It never occurred to Charmides to watch the food, nor to be in the least ashamed of their open poverty. His Greek nature was too primitive for that. He was decidedly sorry when the meal came to an end, and Ramûa, making the proper salutations, followed her mother into the inner room, leaving Charmides and the guest to divert themselves as best they might.

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"Thy wife—does she dance?" inquired Hodo, hopefully, when they were alone.

Charmides shook his head. "No. Had she the aptitude, I should forbid it. A dancing-woman is not for a man's wife."

Hodo sighed, nodded, and seated himself resignedly, while Charmides moved over to the door and looked out upon the night. Presently he darted out and up the stairs, to return a moment later wrapped in a voluminous cloak of dark stuff: an article never unacceptable at this time of year. Re-entering the room, he turned eagerly to his friend.

"Come, Hodo! Now let us go forth into the city, up to the temple of the false Istar. For I am ignorant of all that happens within it at night. Demons and witches I have never beheld. Come you and show them to me. Rise up and come!"

The trader obeyed these suggestions with alacrity, there being no further prospect of seeing Ramûa that night. Before leaving the house, however, Charmides went to her to explain whither he was going, lest she might lie awake for him. Like a dutiful wife, she made no protest; though had he chosen, Charmides might have read in her eyes her little sense of disappointment and depression. However, Charmides did not choose. Hurrying quickly out of the house, he and Hodo crossed the silent square and reached the bank of the canal, across which, at a little distance, rose, like a huge shadow, the great palace of Bit-Shumukin, where the tiny windows set high in the bright-colored walls were marked in blotches of pale light.

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Down in this quarter of the city the streets were deserted. Stillness lay over everything. The moonlight made a fairy day, that hid all the blemishes, the filth, the ruinous rubbish-heaps, and so beautified the things that were shapely that one might have been walking through a city of the silver sky. But the heavens were not perfectly clear. As the two walkers finally arrived upon the Â-Ibur-Sabû a heavy cloud suddenly hid Sin from their sight, and a faint growl of thunder rolled out of the mists, coming to their ears as from a great distance. Charmides straightened up, muffled himself a little closer in his cloak, and turned to Hodo.

"Where find we the second Istar?" he asked, crisply.

Hodo looked at him with a little smile. "Charmides is changed since that day that he took part in the rites of Ashtoreth," he observed, turning towards the north.

In the darkness the Greek frowned. It was the one incident in his life of which he could not bear to be reminded. And this—was this to put him back into that day? It was only with an effort that he shook off a sudden reluctance; but it passed as the moon suddenly shot a stream of light forth from the cloud, and he looked about him. They were well along the Â-Ibur, just opposite the royal granaries. So much the Greek realized. But otherwise the street had a most unfamiliar appearance. Many, many people were abroad in it: shadowy, dark-flitting forms, whether of men or of women it would have been hard to say. Cries, vague and incomprehensible to Charmides, yet each with its peculiar significance among frequenters of the streets by night, came weirdly out of the shadowy darkness. At short intervals on each side of the broad street a string of lamps stretching above a door-way would mark the entrance to some drinking or gambling den unknown to daylight. Into these places muffled figures were continually passing; but few emerged. It was yet too early for that. Charmides would have paused to look into one or two of

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them, but Hodo hurried along, glancing neither to the right nor left. Every few yards, now, the younger man was accosted by some creature of the night, a devotee of false Istar, or a priestess of Lil the ghost, the queen of Lilât, who was lord of darkness. Not once did Charmides make reply to the women; but, had it not been for Hodo, he would have liked very well to halt at some dark corner to watch more carefully all that was going on around him.

The Borsipite knew Babylon too well to stop on so transitory and uninteresting a site as the Â-Ibur-Sabû. Far to the north, almost under the shadows of Imgur-Bel, near the gates of Sin and the Setting Sun, in the square of the temple of the false Istar, all the viciousness of all humanity was visible to every man, and was permitted, in the name of religion, to go on between the hour of the first darkness and the gray of dawn.

On the right side of the square, on the usual platform, but without any ziggurat or tower near it, was the low, broad building miscalled "temple," dedicated to the worship of the goddess of night. This building by day was gray, silent, deserted, shut as to doors and windows, open to no one. By night one would not have known it for the same thing. Its unguarded gates were wide to any that chose to enter—and these were never few. The hundreds of miniature apartments that composed the interior of the place, glowed with light. In the first of these rooms the eager or the newcomers were waylaid, while the idle or the fastidious penetrated as near as possible to the central shrine, where she who represented the goddess, the living substitute elected every year on the first of Nisân, reposed in a dimly lighted grotto of unsurpassed splendor. To her many were summoned; and one out of every twenty, perhaps, remained. But the Chaldean visitor in Babylon that passed five nights in the city and saw not the queen of the temple of false Istar, was, indeed, an old and ugly man.

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On the opposite side of the square stood a little row of houses, also quiet but not utterly deserted by day. In them dwelt the orders of witches, sorceresses, hierodules, priestesses, and vampires attached to the far-famed and infamous temple across the square. These, like their queen, lived by night and slept by day. Into their houses none but members of their orders were admitted. The greatest precision was observed in their rules of life; and the great public knew nothing at all of the real and rather pitiable existence of these dwellers in silent places.

These buildings were the only ones upon the square. To the north and to the south it was enclosed by high walls pierced by as many gates as there were streets leading into it; for no one ever had any difficulty in getting into the place if he cared to enter it.

Finally, what was the square itself? By day it was the quietest spot in the city. By night it was the most crowded and the most wonderful. Great throngs of people always assembled here during the first hour of darkness—men of every station and age; priest and lord, bondsman and official, tradesman, shopkeeper, farmer, laborer, and soldier. All of them were solemnly clad, and they mingled together in an inextricable mass about the myriad bonfires that served to light the performances of the jugglers, snake-charmers, and wizards who earned their living here. Fanatical priestesses of Lil flitted among the people; and these women were a very real danger, for they menaced life in a peculiar way. They were professional vampires, whose habit it was to slip a delicate, poisoned dagger into the vital spot below the heart of a victim, throw themselves upon the body as it fell, and rob it, under the horrid pretence of sucking the blood. Incredible as it is, these women were held in superstitious reverence. No one dared resist the attack of a vampire, through fear of becoming one of them after death. Vigilance and flight were the only means of safety; and certainly what violence was done did not seem enough to deter all Babylon from congregating at this place.

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As Hodo and Charmides at length ended their weary walk and entered the square, the trader gave his companion a quick warning of the dangers there to be encountered; and the Greek, feeling nothing but a pleasurable thrill of excitement, placed his left hand on his not too-well-filled money-bag, and eagerly followed his companion towards the bonfire nearest the door of the temple. It was not easy to force a passage through the close-packed crowd that stood here about the performer. But with some expostulation, a good deal of elbowing, and not a little Babylonish profanity, the two finally reached a vantage-point whence they could watch the performance of the wonder-worker. The man was a Hindu outcast from the Sindh, come hither only he knew how. But from some one, somehow, perhaps by aid of his own mystical religion, he had learned a profession that could not but win him a living, wherever he might be. Charmides, who had never before heard of an exhibition like this, looked on wide-eyed, in great delight. He was utterly absorbed in watching a parrot come slowly forth out of a ferret's throat, when a lithe arm slid gently around his neck. He started backward in terror. Hodo was upon him instantly and the white arm was withdrawn, its owner melting so quickly into the throng that Charmides could not even recognize her. Trembling a little, with a combination of outraged dignity and fright, the youth drew away from the scene that had now lost its interest. Once in the more open spaces of the square, Hodo went to one of the liquor venders who passed continually to and fro, carrying on their backs skins of the heady liquid made from the cabbage of the date-palm, together with various other cheap and highly intoxicating drinks.

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"Come hither, my Charmides, and drink with me!" called his guide, as he bought a double cupful of red liquor from a little, shrivelled man with newly filled pig-skin.

The Greek bravely accepted the invitation and lifted the cup to his lips. He took a single mouthful of the stuff, and then poured the rest of it quietly out upon the ground. Hodo saw nothing. He had taken his beverage, with no joy in its flavor but with every confidence in its happy result. Charmides was not to be outdone in good-fellowship. Straightway he made for another vender,

Hodo, grinning approval, close at his heels; and the first performance was repeated, save for the fact that this time the Greek paid for both drinks. Hodo was now bent upon having too much. Charmides watched him quaff for the third time, himself offered a fourth cup; and after that, having wasted thirty *se* to very good purpose, took his companion by the shoulder and remonstrated.

"Hodo, I shall leave you if you do not cease."

"Spirit of Lil, my wonder, we have but begun! The n-night is young. Behold, Sin and his little brother ride still low in the sky. Well—w-well! If thou wilt be foolishly wroth we will wait your most reverent pleasure. Come now into the temple. It is time. By the battle of Bel and Tiâmat, thou wilt win in to Istar herself, with your golden curls and pale eyes. Come on, little Greek! By all the gods, come on!"

Once again Hodo took the lead; this time rather more crookedly than usual, and Charmides followed at his heels, through the roaring throng, up to the wide gates of the many-roomed house of the false Istar. Together they ascended the platform steps, reached the threshold of the temple itself, wavered there for an instant, like birds ready for flight, and then plunged together into the first torch-lit passage.

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Four hours later Charmides emerged alone. His cloak and his money-bag were both gone. His tunic was rent in more than one place. His face was whiter than Zor's milk; and his hair was in wild disorder. Heeding little how he went, he passed down the steps again into the square. It was nearly empty now. Jugglers and magicians were gone. The fifty fires burned low, or were on the verge of extinction. The moon hung in the west, and the sky was heavy with storm-clouds. The Greek staggered as the cool darkness stole over him. In the house he had left the revelry was at its maddest pitch. Hodo was lost in it, his companion knew not where. Charmides himself had learned the highest form of worship of the false goddess, for he had attained to the inmost shrine. He was young; the flame of his fire had burned too fiercely while it burned at all; and now the reaction had set in. Exhausted, apathetic, half fainting from weariness, he longed for the liquor that he had refused earlier in the night. But drink was impossible now. His money was gone. All that he had with him he had flung into the open coffers of the great courtesan. Now—now there stretched before him the endlessly weary homeward way, that must be traversed on foot. At the prospect he shivered with misery.

Pausing for a moment or two to gather a little warmth for his chilled body from the dying embers of the nearest fire, preparatory to setting forth into the city, he saw, coming towards him out of the gloom of the opposite side of the square, two well-robed men, one of whom he recognized as an under-priest in the temple of Sin. They were going in his direction, and as they passed he moved after them, that he might keep himself awake by listening to snatches of their conversation. Both of them were oblivious of his presence, wholly absorbed in themselves. They did not talk at first; but a sensitive person would have realized that they were indulging in that species of mental intercourse that exists only for those whose hearts are bare to each other. Charmides, even in his irresponsible condition, recognized the sympathy, but could not, of course, partake of it. At the first spoken word, however, he pricked up his ears and listened with all his mind. Oddly enough, he found their topic one of peculiar interest to himself. It was the priest of Charmides' temple who spoke.

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"From Siatû-Sin I heard all the tale—all that any one knows. It is incredible, thrice incredible, that she was cried 'mortal' by the people."

"The people! The cattle, rather!" rejoined his companion, scornfully.

"Howbeit—howbeit—there is something strange in the story. Divine, she knew that death was intended. *Human*, she feared it. That we know."

Kaiya shook his head impatiently. "Since Babylon knew her again, neither Amraphel nor Beltishazzar has dared go to her."

"Amraphel, nor Daniel—nor any man. Her very priestesses, we are told, do not see her face. The silver glory is gone from around her, they say. Now walks she veiled in black and gold from Babylonish looms. Veiled she sits in the mercy-seat. Veiled she receives her food. Veiled she ascends to the ziggurat, and there passes whole days alone in meditation."

"And it is said that one standing on the ziggurat, by the door of the sanctuary, may hear the sound of human weeping in that room."

"Istar weeping! Ho, Kaiya—thou laughest!"

"No. I say what I am told," repeated the other, seriously.

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"A goddess—does not weep."

There was a little pause. The conversation had reached a point whence it could not proceed. Neither man would make the inference implied. It was preposterous—also unnecessary.

Presently, however, when the reverence had been strained a little, Bel-Dur, the priest of Sin, broke into a laugh. "Love we the woman, Kaiya?" he asked, in amusement.

Kaiya was no laggard. He whipped off his religious mood like a garment, and went a step further than his companion. "Let us love her!" said he.

Bel-Dur turned his head to stare at his companion, and once more began to laugh. "Why not? Is it forbidden? Let us carry comfort to the weeping one. Let us banish her loneliness. Let us—"

"Nay, be silent, Bel-Dur, and listen to me. If she be proved a woman, and hath thus deceived all in the Great City, let her—let her, for punishment or reward, be removed—from one temple of Istar into the other."

Kaiya looked swiftly over his companion's face, and then let his eyes move farther afield. Charmides, behind the two men, listening intently, but slow, from weariness, to understand, waited stupidly for the next speech. Kaiya continued:

"Too long we have worshipped her as Istar to banish her now from Istar's place. Let her be carried to the greater temple, and placed there in the inner shrine on the golden couch of the false goddess. Eh? Say you that I speak well?"

At these ruthless words, spoken in jest though they were, Charmides halted. The blood poured into his brain. He clenched his hands. There was a moment of wild impulse to rush forward and throw himself bodily on the Zicarî that spoke. But the two figures moved on through the darkness, and he lost the next words. Much as the priests had shocked him, Charmides felt the greatest anxiety to hear more of their talk. He stumbled forward again as fast as he could, and presently caught up with them, realizing their nearness by the distinctness of their voices; for the moon was now under a cloud, and the night was black and thick. When he was again able to distinguish words, Bel-Dur was speaking; and the topic had evidently shifted a long way from its previous point. Charmides was puzzled at the first sentences.

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"I do not know. Amraphel only admits the Patêû, Sangû, and Enû to their councils; these, and, of course, the three Jewish leaders: Daniel and the sons of Êgibi. The men of Judea—captives, they call themselves—will be a strong force in the uprising."

"Will this come in winter?"

"I do not know. Nothing is commonly known. Yet, in the rainy season, the army of the Elamite could not move northward without great difficulty. It is whispered through the temple that there are to be two armies—one that of Kurush himself; another that of Gobryas, the governor of Gutium. Have you heard it?"

"Whispered, yes. But nothing is sure. If this uprising were to be a matter of three months hence, surely more would be known of it than is known now. Everything is rumored; nothing is definite —"

"Save that Amraphel covets Nabonidus' high place—and will have it. Belshazzar, look you, will never sit upon the golden throne of his fathers."

"Istar being no woman—maybe Belshazzar will be proved no man."

"Then is he a demon. Nabonidus, indeed, may be a woman in man's garb, O Kaiya. But thou wilt find Belshazzar no sluggard in war."

"Verily I believe it. Here is my house. Wilt come in to us, Bel-Dur?"

"Nay, I keep my way to the temple. There is but a short time for purification before the auguries of dawn."

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"Farewell. Amraphel be with you!"

Bel-Dur laughed at the bold sacrilege and departed towards the temple of Sin, while the Zicarî entered into the little house of which he was a member. Charmides was left alone in the narrow street, too weary to go as far as the tenement, undecided as to where to turn his lagging steps for a sorely needed shelter.

Even while he stood, fagged and drooping with sleep, at the door of the monastery, the dawn broke. Night melted and swam before his eyes in rivulets of misty gray. Shadowy buildings reared out of the dim light. From the far-away came the faint howls of waking dogs. There was the gay crow of a cock from some distant field. Then the world was still again. The sky grew eerily clear. Charmides saw the white stars and the fallen moon sink away into the bright heavens. Still the morning was not one of sunlight. It was only a luminous fog that poured down from the sky in swirls. In the midst of it the Greek shuddered with cold, and longed for his lost cloak. Somewhere—somewhere he must go, and quickly. Somewhere he must find shelter from the coming rain. His head throbbed. He was wretchedly nauseated. The night that was past stretched behind him hideously, like the tail of a loathsome reptile. All things were distorted in his mind. He cursed Hodo for making possible for him the night that he had secretly desired. Finally, he put away every thought save that of physical distress, and moved forward at a crawling pace down the narrow street, till he came to the square of the true Istar, whose temple loomed up before him like a cloud-shadow.

The temple gates were open. As Charmides entered the grateful refuge he found more than one wanderer asleep in the silent twilight of the holy house, where sacrificial lights burned by day and by night. Here Charmides also should have laid him down; but, for some inexplicable reason, he was not satisfied with the place. His mind groped for something else. Istar was not here; and he wished to be near her, to feel her presence closer than it was. Following his instinct, he hurried out of the temple and crossed the platform to the foot of the ziggurat, on top of which, in

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her shrine, Istar had begun to pass her nights; though of this fact the Greek, in his right mind, was quite unaware. He made his way upward, round and round the thick tower, along the inclined plane, till he had reached the top. There was the door to the sanctuary. Across it the leathern curtain was closely pulled. Charmides went to stand beside it, listening intently for the sound of weeping. Had not Bel-Dur said that she wept? No sound came from within. Still, Charmides was quite sure that his goddess was there. With a long, shivering sigh he laid himself down protectively across the door-way, pillowed his bare head upon the bricks, and then, all numb and drowsy with fatigue and cold, he sank into a heavy sleep.

X THE ANGER OF BEL

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Charmides was roused by an exclamation. His eyes fell open, and he found himself gazing up into a face that for months had baffled alike his dreams and his actual vision, and that now stood out clearly above him. He sat hastily up, and immediately a pair of gentle hands were laid upon his shoulders, and the most wonderful of voices said to him, sorrowfully and in amazement:

"Rhapsode! Rhapsode! How came you here? Rise quickly from that place!"

The Greek obediently tried to scramble to his feet, but relinquishing the attempt, he put his hands to his burning head and dizzily closed his eyes.

"'Tis the cold!" he gasped, wretchedly.

Istar looked around her. Far below, in the square, many people moved. But the things that took place on the ziggurat were invisible to them.

"Come thou within—into the shrine. Here wilt thou find warmth," she said, drawing him with her own strength to his feet, and pushing back the curtain before the door.

Charmides went with her blindly, and blindly obeyed her whispered behests. He lay down upon her own couch, was covered over with the costly rugs that she herself had used, and felt the human warmth of the little place with a sense of peace and comfort.

"Oh, goddess—forgive—this profanation—of—thy—high—pla—" The murmur ceased, and before the last word had been completed he had sunk away to sleep, this time in a manner to recuperate his strength.

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Istar of Babylon drew a stool to the side of the couch and seated herself thereon, almost without moving her look from the face of the youth before her. Again and again her great eyes traversed his features, the delicate, straight brows, the white eyelids, the long, golden-brown lashes, the short, straight nose, and that perfect mouth which, on a woman, might well have caused another Trojan war. A face as beautiful as ever man possessed was this, and as she watched it a great sigh, that was like a sob, broke from her lips.

"Thou, too—thou, too, perhaps, hast been immortal!" she whispered over him.

Charmides did not hear her. He lay like a statue, his sleep made dreamless and perfect by the presence of her whom he worshipped. And the face of the Greek bore the marks of a peace and content that were not on hers. Istar the goddess, the superb, the omniscient, was no more. Instead—Ah! There was a question that lay eternally at Istar's heart, that she could not answer, that burned her with its insistence. Now she bent closely and more close over her charge, seeking to forget herself in contemplation of his beauty. The eager suppression of herself was pitiable, for the power of her self-control showed how great was its necessity. It was while her lashes almost touched the cheek of the Sicilian that from beyond the curtain came the voice of a ministering eunuch, raised in his regular morning formula:

"Belit Istar, the sacrifice is made: the meats have known the fire. A sweet savor ascends from the consecrated flesh, inviting the goddess to her morning repast. Let Belit Istar command her slave."

"Bring to me goat's flesh, and milk, and cakes of sesame. Let these things be placed outside my sanctuary door. Let no one enter my shrine this day, on penalty of my wrath."

"Belit Istar is obeyed."

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Istar sat up, straight and stiff, for full five minutes after this dialogue had taken place. She was pale with the momentary danger, the remote possibility that the slave, contrary to custom, might have lifted the curtain of the shrine, and, looking in, have beheld Charmides there. And now that the eunuch had safely gone, a trembling seized her, and she leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. The rumors that had spread through the city concerning her were in so much true, that she was in a state of great suffering. The world had become her wilderness. It enclosed her now as a prison from which she could not escape, yet in which her liberty was appalling. Her sense of omniscience, of companionship with the infinite, was quite gone. Nothing was left except—except what she feared as a woman, except what, as a goddess, she cried aloud to the high God and his archetypes mercifully to spare her. Things to which she would give no definite place in

her thoughts crushed her by day and by night with their indeterminate weight. That the worst had not come, that a great and terrifying cataclysm, which would rend her spirit in twain, drew day by day nearer to her, she knew too well. And as these days, these miserable, pain-filled days, crawled one by one away, she would fain have held them to her forever; for, wretched as they were, they were almost happy in comparison to that that must finally come upon her. At this moment as she leaned again over the young rhapsode, Istar scanned his face carefully, minutely, to find a trace of human unhappiness. And, finding none, a great envy of him and of the life that he had found in Babylon came over her. Was it possible that so much of joy might belong to any of God's creatures? And was she, then, utterly forgotten? She pulled herself up with a start. *This* was human, this question of hers. For a moment or two she saw truly what she had become, and a fresh wave of fear swept over her. It passed, however. The supernatural perception was rarely with her now, and then only in quick, reminiscent flashes. She was indeed one of those whom she had so profoundly pitied from her dim abode; for whom she had broken the law of her order; in whose name God had driven her forth from the realm of high indifference into the sentient world, the world of pain.

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This vague and unhappy reverie was broken in upon by the return of the eunuch with food, which he set down outside her door. The proceeding was unusual, and after the man's departure Istar was seized with a new fear. What would the slave think, that she had bidden him not enter the shrine? Would he suspect? Of all things now, she dreaded suspicion; she dreaded being watched; she dreaded beyond measure the exposure that must inevitably come—but not yet! Not yet for a little while! Stealthily now she drew aside the curtain and looked out upon the narrow platform of the ziggurat. No one was there. Upon the door-sill were two dishes of chased gold, the one filled with steaming goat's flesh and roasted pigeons, the other heaped with barley cakes; and the two of them were flanked by a tall silver jar of warm goat's milk. These Istar lifted one by one, carried them into the shrine, and set them upon the table where her shew-bread was usually placed. Then, when the meal was safe within and ready, she went over to where Charmides still lay motionless, and laid her hand gently upon his forehead.

"Rise thou, Charmides," she said.

"Ramûa!" muttered the Greek. He stirred slightly. His eyes opened. Then, suddenly realizing where he was, he leaped to his feet, stared about him irresponsibly for an instant, and finally threw himself on his face before Istar.

"Forgive me, my goddess! I knew not what I did!" he whispered, terror-stricken.

Istar smiled mournfully. "You ask forgiveness for that that I bade you do. Rise, my Greek. Eat of the food that is here. I command it."

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Charmides looked quickly up. He could not deny that he was ravenously hungry. The smell of the meats caused his nostrils to quiver, and the sight of them did away with his reverent wish to refuse. Istar watched him closely as he sat down to her morning meal. She herself could have taken not one mouthful of food, but she had already had a draught of milk; and now, urging the Greek to eat his fill, she turned aside and sat down near the door-way, waiting in silence till the young fellow, after a final cup of the mild beverage, wiped his dagger on his tunic, muttered a line of grace to the gods of Greece, and rose a little shamefacedly.

"Thou hast eaten and art filled, Charmides?" Istar asked, turning to him quietly, with the shadow of a smile.

For answer the Greek bent his knee and bowed his head.

"And now thou goest forth again into the city?"

Charmides looked at her to read the answer that she wished him to make. But the words on his lips were never spoken.

Istar was standing before him a little to the left of the door-way, from which the curtain was half pulled aside. The daylight fell relentlessly over her face and her form. It was upon her face that the Greek's eyes rested: rested in wonder, in amazement, finally with something more than either of those things. Was this last expression one of horror? Istar saw the look and read it; and before its piercing inquiry she quivered. Involuntarily she began to shrink away from him, but escape him now she could not. Knowledge was his. There was no concealment. Then, at length, she accepted the situation, as it was necessary that she should.

"I am a woman," she said, with a gentleness and an unconscious dignity that nonplussed him anew. "Thou mayst not kneel to a woman, Greek. Rise up."

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"I kneel to thee, O Istar!" was his reply.

Then, indeed, her lips quivered, but with a little effort she regained her self-control. "Go then, Charmides. Thou knowest me—now."

Charmides got to his feet, but he made no move towards departure. Instead, after an instant's hesitation, he went a little closer to her, and spoke as he might have spoken to Baba—Baba as she was now.

"Istar—art thou indeed the Istar whom first I beheld in Babylon?"

"Yea, Charmides. I am that Istar; yet I am not the same. Then was I more than human. Now—"

less."

"Who decreed it? Who defiled thee?" he asked, as much of the air around him as of her.

"That thou must not ask. It is what none shall ever know. Depart from me and go thy way. Tell whom thou wilt what I am become. Not long—Ah! It is not long when all the world must know me—as I am."

"Not from the words of my mouth, Belit," Charmides said, sadly. Then, for a little, silence fell between them. He knew that she waited for him to go, and yet, before he went, he felt that he must warn her of the danger that she ran—that danger that he had learned by night. Twist it as he might, the facts were too brutal to be made plain to her. He flushed as he connected, even in thought, the scene of the past night with the grave and grandly beautiful creature before him. Woman she might be, but the mark of her godhead was on her still, could never leave her; for no living woman, of his race or of any other, was comparable to her. And while he thought these things she also stood regarding him, and finally, having read half his mind, opened her mouth and spake:

"Charmides, tell me thy thoughts. I will bear with them."

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He grasped the opportunity eagerly: "O Belit, I must warn thee—warn thee against all the priesthood, those of every temple and house in the city. They threaten thee with untellable disaster. Watch them, lady, and take heed to thyself. Beware whither thy steps lead thee, what things thou turnest thy hands unto. They watch thee with numberless and unholy eyes. They mean great wrong."

"If they will bring me death, I welcome it gladly."

He shot a glance at her that caused her suddenly to drop her eyes. Then he said, quietly: "It is not death. Ah, Istar, do not ask its horror. I myself would deal thee death with my right hand to save thee from it."

Istar shuddered.

"Belit, know this. When comes the day of thy trial, if thou wouldst seek shelter from the pursuers, ask to be taken to the palace of Lord Ribâta Bit-Shumukin, on the canal of the New Year. There, at the gate, demand the presence of the Lady Baba. Baba will conduct thee to the home I live in. It is very lowly, but in it thou shalt find safety. Thou wilt remember this?"

"Truly, Charmides, thou deservest all happiness!" she said, impulsively, coming nearer to him.

He bowed his head. "For thee I came to Babylon. Through thee my heart has found its home. Therefore, when thou shalt ask it of me, my life it is thine."

With this, then, and a last puzzled look at her, he went forth to his much-belated temple duties.

Istar, once more left alone, turned slowly back into her shrine. The little interlude that had broken in upon her loneliness made her shrink from the pall that waited to overwhelm her again. Thereafter the one hour of Charmides' presence remained like a little golden disk in the memory of her solitary months. But now the momentary sense of companionship was too terribly contrasted with the melancholy of her solitude. Hurriedly covering herself with a great, silver-woven, heavy-meshed veil, she left her retreat in the upper morning and left the ziggurat for her dwelling-place behind the temple.

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She did not see her sanctuary again for seven months. It was not that she felt any reluctance about entering it. Simply, her apathy had become such that she was incapable of the physical effort necessary for the ascent of the tower. Once a day she took her place in the mercy-seat in the temple. All the remaining time she spent in the inmost court of her particular suite of rooms, or in the miniature apartment where she was accustomed to sleep. She reclined generally at full length, doing no work of any kind, her eyes shut, the heavy veil shrouding her figure but thrown back from her face, her body perfectly motionless, her very thoughts apparently at rest. Her attendants watched her, wondering at the great change that was working upon that formerly magnificent personality. And through these same temple-slaves, eunuchs, and hierodules, strange rumors concerning the once universally worshipped goddess continued to fly abroad through the city. Certainly there appeared to be little enough of the divine about this weak, ill woman; though why the change had come none of those connected with her had the faintest idea.

These were the days of Istar's wandering in the wilderness. Pain, mental and physical, she learned in every stage, from slight discomfort to nerveless agony. Each morning she woke with the prayer in her heart that night might bring the end of it all, yet knowing well that her end was far away. Her old, archetypal world became gradually more and more indistinct to her memory, till she had all but forgotten it. Her one wish, that she dared not utter, was for annihilation. Yet this would involve a sin that she could not but recognize as unpardonable; for Istar of Babylon bore within her another life, a life that was, as yet, part of her, that by natural law was hers to cherish, that she could not love, that she dared not hate. And it was the day when this new life should take unto itself individuality that she lay dreading through all those dreary months, from the death of summer to Airû, when the new spring came to Babylon.

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The fall of Istar was accomplished. This, by day and by night, she cried to herself, in her agony of self-mortification. It seemed to her that the wheel of the law was the most merciless of all

ordained things. The former dead-alive existence of her godhead seemed holy, now that she could know it no more. The very present, indeed, unendurable as it was, was infinitely better than what was to come. As a matter of fact, her extreme dread of the future was very near to turning her brain, for at every hour she lived the moment of discovery, till, at times, she was like to go mad with it, and to disclose it all, then and there, and so have done with it.

There were two or three of her priestesses who realized, through many of her symptoms, her mortal state; and these were very tender to her in this time of her trial. From their lips no word of her condition reached the outside world. The underlings, only, talked; and it was from underling to Zicarî, Zicarî to Pasîsû, Pasîsû to Sângî, and so to the Patêsi at last, that distorted accounts of Istar's life and suffering passed rapidly in the late autumn. And these rumors quickly reached the ears of the three people who had the strongest personal interest in Istar of Babylon. Two of them were her enemies, bitter, unscrupulous, and powerful. These two were also closely connected. But, while one knew perfectly the mind of the other, and each knew that the greatest desire of the other's political life was Istar's ruin, yet, while matters slowly ripened and daily grew more absorbing, the subject of the approaching disgrace of the whilom goddess was never once opened between them. Amraphel of Bel, from his palace on the Â-Ibur-Sabû, and Daniel of Judea, from his humble house south of the canal of the Prophet, in the Jews' quarter, watched, planned, listened, read each other's hearts, and bided their time, in the way peculiar to those that know well their world. The time for action would come, and without any planning on the part of either of them. But when it did arrive there must be no bungling of the affair.

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Only one little thing in the case, as these two considered it, failed to assume its proper proportion in the perspective of their reasoning. The cause of Istar's undoing was as much a mystery to them as it was to the lowliest kalî in Istar's temple. Both Amraphel and Daniel had long ago ceased to reckon Belshazzar as a factor in this affair. The old suspicion had been a mistake—an incomprehensible mistake. The prince royal went no more to the temple of the goddess, never spoke of or to her, gave rather all his time to affairs of state; which at this moment sorely needed the firm will and the strong hand that he alone, of all his house, possessed.

It was well enough that Amraphel could not read Belshazzar's heart. There was indelibly written what would have startled that reverent man out of all his omniscient composure. For if Istar mourned unceasingly the loss of her godhead, Belshazzar, of the house of the Sun, mourned the loss of her to his life as he would hardly have mourned the fall of that kingdom that was dearer to him than his life. After the strange return from Erech, he had gone daily for two months to Istar's temple, and had sought by entreaty, threat, prayer, and imprecation, to be admitted to her. And again and again, and yet again, had he been refused, till finally he turned his thoughts to the life of his city. But by this means she was not taken from his heart. By night he dreamed of her, and by day, when she was as far from him as the sun, as near as his children, as unapproachable as the silver sky, she was forever a sub-consciousness in his thoughts.

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Thus passed, unhappily and uneventfully, the long winter months of the last year of Nebuchadrezzar's Babylon. In the first week of Airû (April), Belshazzar determined finally to reach Istar's presence. The stories of her condition had of late become alarming, and in the depths of his heart he had begun to dread what had never occurred to him before—the possibility of her death. The mere thought left him agonized, and he felt himself unable to keep away from her longer.

It was late in the morning—a glowing morning in Babylon's fairest month—when he left the palace on foot, clad in a dark mantle that completely covered his head and his figure, rendering him unrecognizable to any but his closest companions. He chose this hour for going because he knew that now Istar's vitality would be strongest, and he dared not give her the shock of seeing him at a time when she would be especially weak. The matter of his admission to her dwelling had been arranged by Ribâta the week before, through hirelings whom he had kept in the temple precincts for some months past. Unnoticed by any one, then, the prince arrived at the bronze door of the building behind the temple. It was instantly opened, wide enough to permit of his passing through; and inside stood a veiled woman, who, after a silent acknowledgment of his rank, led the way through the succession of courts and passages to a closely curtained door-way.

"Belit Istar is within," she whispered. Then on the instant she turned and glided swiftly away.

For the moment Belshazzar stood trembling upon the threshold. His dread was evenly matched with his fever. The throbbing of his heart sent the blood pounding through all his arteries. His hands grew cold and useless. The effect on him of the mere thought of beholding this woman again was something that he did not pretend to understand. Women, ordinarily, were little enough to him. But *this* woman—she who was hidden from him by the single fold of an embroidered curtain—this woman made his earth and his heaven, his soul, his brain, his body, and his blood. Go to her it seemed he could not, for very desire. Once his hand moved forth to lift the curtain, but it fell again to his side. His head whirled. Long as it was since he had seen Istar, yet the picture of her as she had lain unconscious in his arms on the morning of the fall at Erech, came again before him to the smallest detail—perfect, finished, immutable. He felt her weight, he beheld the living pallor of her flesh, he saw the heavy-fringed eyelids close over the eyes that lighted his world. She would live so in his mind forever. Now—he was about to turn away, to leave her alone in peace.

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So far there had been no sound in the room beyond. But just as he was about to depart there came to his ears some words spoken in her voice—her low, exquisite voice, now so weary and so much weaker than it had been of old. The words reached him distinctly; and instantly they caught

his attention. The spell of his reluctance was broken, and all the fire of his eagerness blazed up at the first syllable spoken by her. Quickly he lifted the curtain and stepped out of the sun-flooded court over the threshold of the dimly lighted room. Istar was on her knees before him, her back turned to the door, her head bowed, her long, black veil trailing on the floor around her. Her voice was lifted in prayer, the first words of which had caught his attention, and held him spellbound by means of the sweet, forlorn monotony of her tone, the ring of yearning, of pathos, of utter hopelessness indescribably felt through all the rhythmical cadences, till Belshazzar bent his head in helpless pity over her incomprehensible plight.

Thus, in the unmusical Babylonish syllables, ran her psalm:

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"God of all gods, of men and of ages, of time and of tears: Creator of rivers, Divider of seas, accept of the homage I proffer at noon.

"The winds Thou hast hushed for my peace have obeyed Thee. The sun's golden glory of mid-day is Thine.

"Father of lowliness, High-priest of sorrow, mighty and powerful; Lover of children, in mercy merciless, piteous in justice; raise me from flesh, above wrong, to communion with spirits of heaven.

"My body before Thee is bended. My face is uplifted in prayer that is pure.

"Love all unholy by night I admitted. Yea, I have loved love for Sin's sake, rejoicing in earth-begot passion. Godhead I lost; and desire for goodness departed. Now in the hour of trial, homeward I come to my Father at noon; no more in fear to approach Him, believing His mercy omniscient. Home come I, washed in my tears.

"Lord of the noon, my Begetter, absolve me!

"Lord of the sun, of the well-flowing river, receive me that offer Thee praise.

"Lord of the world and of children and angels, bequeath me forgiveness of sin.

"Lord of all lords, from Thy home grant me peace everlasting. O Amanû, Thou on High."

"Amanû," came the soft echo of a masculine voice from behind her.

With a gasp that resembled a sob, Istar faced about, still on her knees. In turning, she drew the heavy veil that had hung around her close over her face, so that, to any one but him who looked at her, she would have been unrecognizable. Belshazzar, indeed, confronted by the black mask, felt his speech suddenly suppressed within him. His cloak had fallen to his feet, and he stood revealed in all the splendor of his strength and royal beauty. But before her he was powerless to act. He left the situation helplessly to her.

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Istar herself, for the moment, was stunned. In that first minute that she looked upon him again, the world around her grew gray and indistinct. Her cold body trembled. In her dry throat a sob struggled to come forth. But in her heart—ah, who would have believed it!—was rising a great, overweening joy. God had heard her! God sent the answer to her prayer—such an answer as she had not dreamed of. Yet she knew that the Comforter was come. In this thought Istar loosened the veil again and took it from her head, so that her face, white, thin, great-eyed, mournful, and still divinely perfect, was revealed to him.

"Istar!" he cried, half in sudden woe at her too apparent illness, half still in passionate admiration. He had seen her before with the silver aureole gone, but now her very face, in its shining purity, was of refined silver. "Istar!" He spoke the word tenderly, and went a little nearer to her.

She had fixed her eyes upon his, and the painfully strained look in her face showed him that she strove to read his mind: his purpose in coming to her. As he approached nearer still she rose suddenly to her feet, for one instant held the protecting veil close around her figure, and then, still without taking her fear-stricken eyes from his face, let it drop, and stood there revealed before him, clothed from head to heel in a scant, straight tunic of white wool.

For an instant Belshazzar saw her stupidly. His eyes travelled over her and suddenly he saw, and his self-control broke down. With a great, hoarse cry of pity and of love, he rushed to her and caught her close in both of his strong, protecting arms.

"Istar! Istar! Thou untrusting one! My beloved! Thou hast suffered alone and told me nothing! Where was thy faith? Hast thou for an hour doubted my love? Know you not how, in my heart, I have mourned thee, have yearned for thee, day by day? Yea, the anger of Bel alone has kept us apart one from the other. The very gods are jealous that I should have thee, thou lotus-flower of the world! Speak to me, O my beloved!"

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"Belshazzar! Belshazzar!" she whispered, once, twice, thrice. Then, seeming to gain courage from the syllables of his name, she went on, half fearfully still: "I have hardly loved thee until now. God hath heard me, I think. But, oh! the long, rainy months! The endless days! The eternal nights! How have I prayed to die in them, prayed with my heart and with my lips to die."

He caught her the more convulsively in his arms. "And now?" he asked.

"Ah, now! Now is my strength restored within me! I have new courage. I shall bear my trial now.

Thou needst not fear. Suffering will be sweet, for I no longer dread the anger of Bel—of the one God."

"Istar, are we not now as God? Together shall we not defy all? The eleven great gods, and—high Istar herself?"

Istar of Babylon looked dazedly into his eyes. "Do you not believe on me?" she asked, faintly.

"I believe in thy love. That is all my belief."

"But the divinity that was mine?"

He caught her a little closer. "Istar, art thou not a woman?" he asked, gently, but inexorably.

There was a silence. Istar was making her last struggle against fate. At the defeat her head fell heavily forward upon his breast. "Yea, I am a woman," she muttered, faintly.

Belshazzar's lips were pressed upon her forehead. Then suddenly he lifted her in his arms and carried her over to the couch that stood at one end of the room. On this he laid her, and covered her over with one of the heavy, silken shawls used for that purpose. Then he stood off and inspected her, to see that she was comfortable.

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"Lie thou there," he said, "till I return within the hour with a litter borne by my household slaves. In thy trial I will be beside thee; thou shalt be in my house, protected by my name, lodged as my princess. But one hour more, and then, for all time, we shall be together!"

He spoke with perfect confidence, and, having finished his explanation, would have departed had not Istar risen quickly from her couch and moved towards him again.

"Gratitude be to my lord!" she said, with a faint smile. "Yet I may not leave this temple till the hour comes. There will be a day when Bel shall cast me forth alone into the city. But, of myself, I may not leave the house to which the All-Father intrusted me. Nor shall mine eyes again behold thee here. Go forth in peace, Belshazzar. My great love is thine; and before many days I think that I must come to thee. But we must patiently abide apart until the time. Now must thou leave me. Farewell!"

"Istar! What is this folly that you speak! You are mine—mine to care for, to cherish. Your suffering is also mine. I go now, but to return again for you. Or shall I despatch one of your eunuchs to the palace with my message? Yea, that will I do, and remain at your side till the litter comes."

The impatient tone was such as he might have used to one of his wives, to Khamma, to any woman who by law belonged to him. Istar heard him, but felt no anger at the words. Her manner showed only dispassionate self-possession.

"Belshazzar, I have spoken. Shall I say the words again? Go thou forth in peace. When my hour comes I will turn to thee. But we must wait that hour, for it is the will of the great Bel."

The prince royal was taken aback. This was not a woman's way, yet neither was it after the manner of men. He tried her again, this time more gently, with reason, with persuasion, finally with undisguised entreaty. She did not change. The dependent Istar, Istar the supplicator, the woman, was gone. In her place was come the oracle of the mercy-seat. Belshazzar dared not be angered by her unchanging assurance. In the end he acknowledged himself defeated. He could only kneel and implore that the hour of her home-coming be soon. Then, having held her for one moment more in his arms, he left her, wrapping the mantle closely about him as he stepped forth again into the hot sunshine of his new and mysterious world.

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As for Istar, with the answering of her prayer she entered the land of heart's peace. God in high heaven had not forgotten her. Belshazzar, on earth below, waited her coming. She could feel that the day of her suffering was close at hand, and she was fortifying herself to endure it. Thus ten days—ten days of the fair spring—passed by. Istar's black-veiled form was seen morning and evening on the temple platform, and she sat in the temple regularly at the mercy-hour, but did not ascend the ziggurat. During this time she knew but ten uneasy moments. These were when, once each day, always, as it were, by chance, she encountered the lean and bent figure of Daniel the Jew, who lurked, morning and evening, about this spot. His thin, vulture-like face, with its scrawny, gray-streaked beard, and his small, beady, piercing eyes, haunted Istar's thoughts, and remained with her as an omen of evil; and she shrank from him even less for herself than for some unreasonable ill that he seemed to promise to Belshazzar, her earth-lover. Daniel never addressed her, never failed profoundly to salute her, never remained longer than a bare second within her sight. And she strove to put him from her mind, and to give all of her days and nights to careful preparation for the approaching hours of her trial.

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On the morning of April 21st her attendants found her lying in a swoon on her bed. She was quickly revived, and awoke to the world with a look of such happiness in her face that her women wondered silently, and went back to their duties rejoicing. Istar attended the morning sacrifice—a thing that she had not done for three months past. She drank a cupful of milk, watched the goat's flesh roasted on the altar, heard the prayers for the morning, and extended the mercy-hour far into the afternoon. The sun hung just above the horizon when she re-entered the court-yard of

her dwelling and called for her evening meal. With unquestioning surprise it was brought her, and she ate of it. Then, in the mellow evening, she said her farewell to the consecrated home where she had dwelt so long.

As Istar left her dwelling and walked slowly towards the foot of the ziggurat, she saw that the whole city lay in a flood of gold. Her steps were slow and fraught with pain. As she halted at the foot of the high tower to look upward, wondering how she should reach its top, a voice from another sphere spoke to her and bade her hasten her steps. It was almost seven months ago that her feet had last touched this pavement. Then she had not been physically weak, but mentally—! She sighed as she remembered her terror of herself and of all her surroundings. At last, with a deep breath, she began her ascent. Up, up, and up, step by step, while the glorified light of day's death swam before her vision and the evening wind fanned her cheeks, while the sweet scent of the flowers that covered the desert was borne to her by the breeze, she went, a prayer in her heart, a resolute determination to endure bravely holding her thoughts. Up and up she mounted, till at last the empty summit of the tower was gained, and she stood again at the door of the room that had seen her incarnation.

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Here, on the height, Istar stopped to look out over Babylon. It stretched around and below her like a mirage, like the vision of a holier city, wrapped all in clouds of blinding fire. A little to the east, near enough so that the white designs on the shining turquoise ground-work were fairly distinct, rose, from the tufted green of the surrounding park, the new palace built by Nabonidus, in which Belshazzar lived. Along the east side of this building ran the bright Euphrates, passing here the most imposing point in all its mighty course. Opposite the new palace, on the other bank, were the two huge structures once inhabited by Nabopolassar and his son, that greatest of Babylonish rulers. Across from Nebuchadnezzar's former home, connected with it by the great bridge, itself a triumph of engineering, was the palace-crowned mound of the great one's Median queen, called by subsequent generations "the hanging gardens." This alone of all the unused royal dwellings was kept in repair by the present ruler. And now, at the time of the day's highest glory, Istar's eyes eagerly sought its fresh verdure, the tier on tier of leafy foliage that hid such fragrances and such blossoms as she rarely saw. And while she gazed upon the monument of a king's devotion, the lonely woman found it in her heart to wish that she might have been that queen whose sorrows and whose earthly joys were now so comfortably ended, whose mortality had come to dust, whose soul enjoyed its just rewards.

Istar's eyes moved on down the river to the lower part of the city, which consisted of acre upon acre of low, brick buildings, hardly relieved by a single tower or raised roof, stretching in gray monotony off to where Imgur-Bel suddenly reared its gigantic height skyward. Over this wall and the top of its still loftier brother, Nimitti-Bel, Istar, high as she stood, could not see. Her brick-wearer's eyes yearned for some glimpse of the quiet palm-groves that lined the river-bank beyond Babylon. Indeed, their fragrant freshness was borne up to her by the evening wind. Closing her eyes, she saw them as, nine months before, she had watched them from her barge on the way to Erech. And thus, while she contemplated many things, the sunset light began to fade, the shadows mingled together over the gray roofs and bright towers of the city. Twilight deepened; and the moon was not yet risen. So at last Istar turned from the far-stretching scene and lifted up the curtain of her long-unused shrine.

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She was greeted by darkness. Evidently it was many weeks since any one had entered the little room. A fine, white dust lay sifted over the rugs, the table, the golden chair, the couch where Charmides last had lain. Istar looked round with a sob in her heart—a sob of pitiable weakness and pain. It was impossible now for her to summon any attendant. Neither had she strength to descend the ziggurat again. Leaving the curtain pulled wide open, that she might feel some communication with the world beyond, she went to the couch, removed the top rug with all its dust, then let fall her veil, and offered up one last prayer for pity and for strength before she lay down resignedly in the night.

Twilight slowly passed across the earth and trailed away into the beyond. Thereupon came terror of the dark, together with the first stabs of sharp pain. She had one swift, torturing moment, and a low cry at the strangeness of it escaped her. Then calmness returned. She was prepared, she thought, for the rest. One moment, two, three, passed, in strained expectation. The darkness hung around her like a covering, but the suffering did not return. Her lips moved continually, but her brain refused to work. It seemed to her that the night must be passing. Soon, perhaps, she might sleep. Her eyes were closed; her mind was slipping away into freedom, when—she started up again. It was once more upon her, this dreaded thing; and now she knew that there was no escape. When it had passed this time she waited, stiff and strong, hands clenched, breath coming and going rapidly, for the return.

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It came once again, and yet again, more and more swiftly, more and more terribly. She made no sound now. Her eyes stared straight into the blackness with the gaze of one that does not see. Here was something that, with all her months of preparation, she was not prepared for. No imagination could have painted this; and her loneliness but added to her terror. From the night a thousand malignant eyes seemed fixed upon her with the look of Daniel the Jew. Yet presently she discovered that these eyes were stars—fair, silver stars that shone, far away, through the open door-way. A little later the night grew luminous, and the hideous darkness was softened and smoothed away. Pale, yellow rays shot up the sky, dimming the stars' white radiance, banishing their gaze. It was the moon, the blessed moon, Istar's father, who, entering the heavens, put her tormentors to flight. The woman's thoughts were growing incoherent. She was a little delirious. Her body was racked and torn and bruised. The agony, too great to be realized and endured,

drove her into numb unconsciousness—an unconsciousness that was hideous with subconscious understanding. The one thought to which she clung through all the hours of anguish was of the morning—the merciless daylight, when the searching sun, the discerning, prying sun, must come upon her here, must see, must know—must disclose all to the wondering world.

The fair moonlight sickened her now. Her eyes swam and her head reeled with its bluish light. She prayed for clouds—and rain. Rain! Water! The thought reached her suddenly, out of the aching void. If there were only some one—one only creature, to put water to her dying lips! She burned, she parched, she scorched with thirst. Ah, if some one were at hand! She tried to think of a name to call. And presently one recurred to her. She did not stop to think over it. The syllables hung ready on her lips—were said in a voice so faint and weak that one standing in the door-way could not have heard them. It was a liquid word, one easy to hear, and the only one that her mind, in its strange plight, retained.

"Allaraine!" she whispered.

A breath of cool air poured into the little room, and borne upon it was a rosy beam that gradually suffused the bed in a delicate radiance. With the first shedding of this light, Istar's pain suddenly ceased. Her spirit was uplifted with the mighty relief. Her fast-shut eyes opened again. Above and about her was open space. The roof of the shrine was gone, and its walls also. All around there floated a vast concourse of dimly outlined forms—millions of archetypes, borne on their outspread wings. A chord of distant music rang down the shaft of light, and Istar knew from whom it came. Gravely the goddess greeted her companions; yet none returned the greeting, or seemed to recognize her presence. She tried to go to them, but the bed remained beneath her. She was still a prisoner. After some moments of waiting in the midst of this familiar scene, the rainbow path into her room palpitated with fresh, living light. The bells rang louder in her ears. One form had separated itself from the confused mass, and became distinct to her eyes. Allaraine dropped out of the high space, and was presently standing at her bedside. The room closed in again. The pink light disappeared. Once more the moonlight stole upon her. The night was sweet with the perfume of the lotus, and Istar wept with delight. She was there alone with Allaraine, her brother of the skies.

Through the long hours he ministered to her, holding the cup of water to her lips, plaiting up the heavy masses of hair that swept the floor at her side. And when the last agony came upon her, his voice held her fast to the thread of her strange existence. Finally, at the night's end, it was he who put into her arms the living one whom she had brought into the world.

Bending over them both, the god blessed the child and kissed the mother's brows before he went his way out into space, leaving behind him a trail of song that was sweeter than the perfume of the jasmine. There, from the spot into which he flew, the day broke, and the moon fainted on the western horizon. Istar's heart throbbed with a great, new peace and a human love. Life was no longer strange to her. The bringing of it forth brought her understanding of its richness. And, as the child on her breast lay sleeping, so at last her own eyes closed, until, while the light brightened and the great city woke again, the soul of Istar was at peace.

At sunrise a flood of yellow beams poured into the little room, illuminating everything in it, throwing a halo over the motionless figures of the mother and child on their well-ordered couch. Suddenly the smooth light was broken by a shadow that darkened the door-way. A man stood there on the threshold, peering into the room. His bright, black eyes travelled swiftly over the scene, resting last on the bed. He gave then a sudden, swift start. Glancing quickly behind him to make sure that he was alone, he took a single noiseless step inside, and, inch by inch, moved to the couch, bending over it till the end of his grizzled beard all but touched the cheek of Istar.

As if the glance of the intruder could be felt through the unconsciousness of sleep, Istar stirred restlessly. The infant on her breast gave forth a faint cry and opened its deep eyes upon the morning world. Thereat the Jew, in timely fright, turned and scurried hastily from the room, escaping Istar's glance by no more than three seconds. And as Istar, deeply disturbed, looked out upon the world, she suddenly caught her little one close to her in her protecting arms, murmuring gently:

"O God! O God! I give Thee praise! Spare me this inestimable gift! Leave me for my joy this little life of mine—and take all that Thou hast given else, great Father!"

XI FROM THE HOUSE OF HEAVEN

When Daniel was far beyond the range of Istar's vision he did not lessen the rapidity of his gait. Rather, he increased it, till the last five yards of his descent of the ziggurat were done in a quick run; and the few people already abroad in the square of Istar looked up in amazement to see the unkempt figure of the slinking Jew advancing at an eager trot across the open space and into the Â-Ibur-Sabû.

Beltishazzar, however, had at that time little thought for the opinions of the people whom he passed. The one thing that he desired above all others, the thing that had assumed a place

paramount to his disinterested historical desires—the downfall of Babylon and the freeing of his race—had come to pass. Moreover, the accomplishment of it was, apparently, by the will of God alone. Surely no man earnestly wishful of attaining to a certain end ever arrived at it by simpler or more thorough process. It was a miracle. It required no explanation, no twisting of facts, no blustering denunciations. Who would ask stronger proof of the mortality of this impostor than the sight of her child, and her own weakness? Reverence for the mother-love, for its beauty, for heart's peace, did not occur to the prophet. He felt that Istar's great sin, her tremendous fraud, her immense daring, were things that a statesman might secretly marvel at, possibly admire, in a way. But naturally these feelings would never be expressed.

In such a course wound Daniel's triumphant thoughts as he hurried with them down the wide street towards the palace of the high-priest of Bel. It was unusually early in the day for an interview with Amraphel; and of this the Jew had scarcely stopped to think when he halted before the outer gate of the ecclesiastical dwelling. The night-guards had not yet made way for the more gorgeously attired eunuchs of the day; but the Jew was too familiar a figure to all Amraphel's household to be denied admittance by any of his servants. There was some little doubt expressed as to their lord's having risen. But the doubts were couched in reverent terms, and shortly the lean and ill-kempt Jew was ushered through the vast, empty courts and halls, to the little dining-room of the high-priest's private suite.

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Only two slaves, servitors, were in this room when the visitor entered it; and these were busy preparing for the arrival of the master. The wrought ivory and ebony couch had already been drawn up before the table on which various fruits were laid out. And shortly after Daniel made his appearance; a place was added to the table and an arm-chair drawn to it, evidently for him. He would have seated himself, when there came a sound of steps in the passage-way, and Amraphel, white-robed and whiter-bearded, came in, followed by two cringing slaves bearing the long-handled feather fans in use even at this early season. Beltishazzar read the priestly mood at sight. It bore small relation to that benign and fatherly manner assumed for the morning sacrifice, and coming on naturally of an evening, after the long day of adulation and worship. Daniel almost prostrated himself on the old man's entrance, and got in return a slight acknowledgment of his presence, and the words:

"Is your visit early, Jew, or the last of your night?"

"The last.—May it please you, lord of Bel, to see me alone. My news is not such as should grow cold. Over it, all Babylon will laugh for joy."

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Amraphel looked at this companion of many schemes a little sourly as he sank back on his couch, and took up an orange from its dish of gold. "What is the nature of this laughing news that you should impart it by stealth?"

Suddenly Daniel lost his patience—a thing not usual with him. "My lord receives it thus"—he snapped his fingers—"and behold, I take it to Vul-Ramân of Bit-Yakin, who, hearing it, will not scoff." And the Jew actually made as if to get up from his chair.

"Stop!" cried the high-priest, sharply. "There is no cause for anger. Sit you, and we will speak of it."

Daniel shrugged his indifference, but slipped into his chair again, without, however, offering to touch food.

My lord looked round upon his slaves, indicating each of them with a little glance, and designating those that fanned him with a gesture. "Depart and leave us," he said, shortly.

His command was obeyed with decided alacrity, and when the bare feet had patted their noiseless way far down the adjoining corridor, Daniel straightened up in his chair with a little rustle and said, in a low tone: "My news, Amraphel, is, shortly, this: Istar of Babylon, whom we have feared, is a woman—a woman, weak, powerless, full of sin."

Daniel paused, and Amraphel looked at him with a little curl of the lip. "Is that all?" he said, after a pause. "Is that all? Art thou drunk, Jew?"

Daniel did not lose his temper now. He smiled, contemplatively, and went on: "Nay, I am not drunk, lord high-priest, neither is that all my news—yet, in a way, it is all told. If all Babylon knew too well that Istar were a woman—and weak—and sinful? *Hein?* Would it not be enough?"

"If the *people* knew—the people—yea, it might be."

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Thereupon Daniel told without more ado all that he had seen, and how Istar lay at this moment in her sanctuary with the infant in her arms.

Then, indeed, Amraphel was touched to the quick. Verily, here was news! Here was such news as caused the most unemotional man in the Great City to start up from his couch and pace the floor with hurried and uneven steps, his eyes alight, his pale face tinged with red excitement, his hands busily twisting his robe. It was some moments before he spoke, but, once begun, Daniel sat silent and amazed.

"Ah, Beltishazzar, wisely mayst thou rejoice now. Babylon—Babylon, the city of Nabopolassar, my father, shall at last stand free before me! Listen, listen, all ye people! Istar of Babylon is fallen. She is fallen who reigned as a goddess—over me. Mark me, Jew, time was when Istar of Babylon

was divine. The glory of the unknown God flowed around her. Her lips spoke truth. In her heart was hidden all knowledge. The life that she lived was unapproachable by mortal man. And while she remained thus, I dared not try my full power in the city.

"But now—now! Ah, Beltishazzar, now the fear is gone! The goddess has tasted the bitterness of human love and is become mortal. Her sin has found her out. To-day, even to-day, she shall be driven from that temple that her presence defiles. Her downfall shall be cried aloud to them that have worshipped her. Her disgrace shall be proclaimed throughout the kingdom. Let her invoke what aid she may, human or divine! I defy her now to deny me omnipotence in Babylon.

"And thou, Daniel—thou that broughtest this word—have no fear that thy people shall lack favor in my sight, and in the sight of the mighty lord of Elam. Let us henceforth work together for that end which, in the name of our gods and of the God of Judah, shall be accomplished within the year!"

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He paused in his speech and in his walk, and his head fell upon his breast. He descended quickly, did Amraphel, from heroics to practicality; and this, perhaps, was one reason of his great success in life. Daniel eyed him in silence till the echoes of the tirade had died away and there had been time for thought. Then he said, shortly:

"You will drive her from the temple, Amraphel? How?"

"By Nebo, with an ox-goad, that is used for cattle!"

Daniel shrugged incredulously. "And whither drive you her?"

"She may go, if she will, to her proper abode—the temple of false Istar, near the gate of the setting sun."

Daniel drew a sharp breath. "Father Abraham!" he muttered, himself amazed at Amraphel's pitiless joy in triumph. Then, a moment later, he added: "It is a just ending. Well, my lord, I take my departure now."

"Thy departure! By Marduk, thou shalt come with me to the temple! Thou must be at my side when I enter her shrine."

Daniel cringed quickly, and proffered a swift excuse. Keen he might be; bold in his way; master of diplomacy, of deceit, and cunning; but discreet, cautious, nay, cowardly, when it came to his personal safety, he was always. It was true that Istar was no more and no less than a weak and unfortunate woman; but enough of divinity still clung to the thought of her to keep the Jew far from any desire to stand before the people as her accuser. Amraphel might be angry, might persuade or command. In the present matter Beltishazzar was immovable. Amraphel recognized it presently, and saw that nothing was to be done but to summon Vul-Ramân, with all possible speed, from the neighboring temple, and to command a chariot to be prepared at once and brought into the outer court of the palace.

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These things were quickly done; and Daniel had been gone for many minutes by the time Vul-Ramân answered the peremptory summons and stood before his superior. The priest of Nebo was in a temper, and greeted Amraphel in an undisguisedly irritable tone.

"My lord, it is the hour for sacrifice. My place was at the altar. By your message hath Nebo lost his morning savor, and the temple the flesh of three goats. What is needed of me here?"

"And has the freeing of Babylon cost the price of three goats, O Bit-Yakin? Pray thou for strength to endure the loss!"

Vul-Ramân looked at him in displeasure. "Are thy words oracles?" he said, sourly.

"Within the hour their light will illumine thy understanding. Now thou art to drive with me up to the temple of Istar. They bring my cloak."

Vul-Ramân looked on with sudden interest as two slaves entered the room where he stood. One of them carried a long, woollen garment of Tyrian weave, heavily embroidered in golden threads in a pattern containing the various symbols of the different gods. It was a mantle worn only upon the greatest occasions. This being fastened upon Amraphel's shoulders with well-wrought pins of gold, the second slave crowned the high-priest with his golden-feathered tiara, sandalled him with sandals embroidered in the same rich metal, and finally put into his hand something that caused Vul-Ramân to exclaim:

"What, in the name of Nergal's holiness, do you with the bullock's goad, Amraphel!"

"Come you with me, Vul-Ramân. Our way lies to the north, to the temple of Istar. From it I shall drive forth the false woman that dwells there receiving worship. For—"

"Amraphel!" Vul-Ramân stopped short. "Art thou raving? What canst thou do against Istar? Because by her mercy we are spared punishment for our last sin against her, darest thou again attempt her downfall? Attempt it by such means as this? If thy mind has not left thy body, then thine arrogance leads thee to death!"

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The high-priest waited till the other had finished his protest. Then he said, calmly: "Istar of Babylon is a woman with child. Her divinity is gone. I go to drive her from the heavenly house."

In silence the two men proceeded to the court-yard, where, surrounded by a group of slaves, stood the golden chariot with its white horses and flashing harness. The driver stood holding the reins in his hands. On the arrival of the two priests there was a general obeisance. Amraphel entered the vehicle first. Vul-Ramân, not without a perceptible hesitation, followed him. The master raised his hand, the driver shouted to his steeds, and the powerful animals, with one spring, shot forward, drawing the whirring chariot after them through the bronze gate way, out into the Â-Ibur-Sabû.

"The temple of Istar!" said Amraphel.

The flashing wheels turned to the north, and in brave silence they proceeded towards the square at the end of the broad street. Not a word was spoken during the drive. The two priests, one on either side of the driver, stood like statues—Vul-Ramân with a face as white as a summer cloud, Amraphel in immovable calm. The right hand of the high-priest rested on the rim of the chariot in front of him. His left, the one with which he clasped the short, black goad, with its two cruel leathern thongs, hung at his side. As they went along, the people in the street stopped to stare in curiosity as to the wherefore of Amraphel's state magnificence, and Vul-Ramân's appearance so far from his temple at the hour of morning sacrifice. When finally they entered the square of Istar, it was wholly deserted; for service was going on in the temple, and a respectable throng was assembled to witness the weekly slaughter of doves and the broiling of their flesh over the cone-fire on the altar.

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"Istar will be there at the sacrifice, doubtless," whispered Vul-Ramân, hurriedly, as they alighted together at the steps of the platform.

"Let us seek her," was all the reply he got. Amraphel exhibited not a trace of uneasiness, and yet, to a certain extent, the fear of the priest of Nebo had its effect on him. Mentally he cursed the prudent cowardice of Daniel, who, having arranged this situation, had left him to run the chance of disgrace and defeat alone.

As they came to the door of the temple the two priests found themselves confronting the throng of men and women who were just emerging into daylight. The sacrifice was over. But as Amraphel, in all his magnificence halted before them in the door-way, the people also came to a stand-still, lowered their heads, and waited silently to learn if there was a reason for his coming. For some seconds, however, Amraphel stood passive. He perceived the officiating priestess coming towards him from the altar, and he waited for her to reach his side. Then she, and Bit-Yakin, and finally the high-priest, performed the ceremonious greetings of the religious code; and only after these were over did Amraphel say:

"We seek the lady—Istar of Babylon. Is she in the temple, O servant of the great goddess?"

"The spirit of the goddess hath attended on the sacrifice. So spake the omens, most high lord," was the disturbed reply.

"Belit Istar, then, is not here?"

"Nay, Lord Amraphel. She is in her shrine at the top of the ziggurat, to which she retired at sunset yesterday."

"We will ascend into her presence."

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The priestess started. "Nay—nay! Let my lord remain here below. The goddess is alone with her brothers. She commands that none shall ascend to her to-day."

"Begone, woman!" shouted Amraphel, suddenly breaking out into a very well-arranged burst of anger. "Begone, thou deceived and deceiving servant of a false goddess! Hear ye, ye people!" And he turned to the astonished multitude. "Hear ye who, for many months—nay, years—have worshipped at an altar of evil! Istar of Babylon, whom, unknowing, ye have called Belit, spouse of the great Bel, is no goddess. As the great gods have revealed to me by night, she is but a woman, sacrilegiously dwelling in the house of heaven, accepting the homage of the multitude, delivering oracles from the mercy-seat, receiving offerings and the sacrifice day by day throughout the months, deceiving you and them that dwell with you. Now I come to expose her and to deliver her up to you to do with as ye will. Come ye forth and assemble about the foot of the ziggurat while I ascend, that ye may behold her when she comes forth from the holy shrine of the outraged goddess that dwells afar from us in the silver sky."

Amraphel made this speech with such an air of mingled sorrow and outraged dignity that Vul-Ramân, for all his amazement, could not but applaud it. The crowd showed less indignation than bewilderment and curiosity. But as the old man turned from them to cross the platform, the people followed him like sheep, leaving only the wailing hierodules behind them in the temple.

Bit-Yakin and the high-priest arrived at the foot of the ziggurat side by side, with the foremost of the company ten feet behind. Here, once more, Amraphel turned to them, raising his right hand majestically as he spoke: "Wait here for her whom I shall drive unto you; but see that, on penalty of the wrath of the gods, ye ascend not to the shrine."

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Then, hearing the low murmur that told the acquiescence of the obedient flock, Amraphel and his shadow began their ascent. From below, the people watched them in growing wonder, in growing uneasiness. They had seen the ox-goad in the high-priest's hand, and they were thrilled with strange terrors as they considered what its use might be. Istar—their Istar—Istar, the great

goddess—flogged! Impossible! Yet—yet—the curiosity was upon them, and they waited to see.

And now the two priests stood at the door-way of the shrine. The leathern curtain was closed before them. Nothing could be seen. There was a little pause, and, for the shadow of an instant, Amraphel wavered. Vul-Ramân, closely watching him, felt his heart sink.

"Shall I lift the curtain?" he whispered, devoutly hoping for a negative reply.

But Amraphel had gone too far now to falter. He nodded.

The heart of the priest of Nebo gave a throb of fear. He made no move to obey the command. Amraphel glanced at him sharply, took one step forward, and dragged the curtain from the door.

There was a low, frightened cry, supplemented by a weak wail from a faint and tender voice. The high-priest shaded his eyes with his hand till he could see into the interior of the room; and then, indeed, his heart beat high.

In that room, sitting now upon the great golden chair, was Istar of Babylon. She was clothed in the long, white, woollen tunic, that was scarcely so pale as her face. She was unveiled, and her silken hair, unbound and tangled, fell over her whole form and down to the floor on either side. Upon her knees, wrapped in a square of sacrificial muslin, its little form bathed in a dim, effulgent light that radiated from its body, lay the babe—her child.

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Upon the entrance of the two priests, after the one startled cry, Istar sat perfectly quiet, her drawn face no whiter than before, her great, dark eyes staring wonderingly at the intruders, her breath coming and going rapidly between her parted lips.

Amraphel, whose self-composure had returned to him doubled in strength now that he was sure of his position, stood surveying her leisurely, with undisguised triumph. Vul-Ramân, on the other side, had also lost his fear. His delight at the turn of affairs was hardly less than his amazement; for, since the morning at Erech, Istar had had, in all Babylonia, no firmer believer in her divinity than Vul-Ramân of Bit-Yakin. Yet now, human, mortal, weak, she certainly was. Fitting, indeed, was it that she should leave the temple of the great goddess. And as he thought upon the manner of her expulsion, his lips curled in an involuntary smile.

At that moment Istar's eyes were resting on his face. She saw his expression, and she read all the cruelty of it; for suddenly, raising the infant in her arms, she rose to her feet.

"Why have you come hither?" she whispered, hoarsely, her eyes moving from one to the other.

"Thou deceiver! Thou blasphemer! Thou thing of evil, of unholiness! We are come in the name of her whose abode thou hast so long profaned, to drive thee forth from Ê-Âna to thy true dwelling—the temple of the false Istar!"

Istar's nostrils quivered with scorn. She lifted her head in a final proud defiance of the words of the high-priest. At the same instant Amraphel's left hand was raised. The goad whirred through the air, and the thongs came stinging across the face of the woman.

A sharp scream, that could be heard by the multitude below, rang out from the shrine on the ziggurat. The woman caught her baby close to her breast, shielding it as well as she could with both arms. The cut of the whip had left a bright crimson weal across both cheeks and just over her mouth. The goad was lifted over her again, and this time she shrank backward from it.

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"Get you forth, false creature, from the heavenly house!" cried Vul-Ramân, in raucous tones.

Amraphel moved out of her path, and Istar, blind and dumb with terror and amazement, started towards the door. As she went the whip fell again, this time on her shoulders, and again the scream followed it. Hugging the babe yet closer to her breast, she ran out upon the ziggurat platform in the blaze of the sunlight, and, with Amraphel and Vul-Ramân close at her heels, began an ever-hastening descent, round and round the tower, towards the square below. Up to her ears, from that square, came a long-drawn, minor groan. The people below were waiting for her, waiting for her as vultures wait. Behind her, driving her on to them, were their priests. She herself, helpless, bewildered, numb with the pain of exertion, beside herself with a desperate, fierce sense of mother-protection, knew scarcely what she did, was unmindful of what must come to her.

Since the priests had left them, the numbers of the crowd were considerably swelled. Istar's temple-servants, eunuchs and women both, had come pouring from the temple and the dwelling to witness the issue of this undreamed-of struggle. Also every one that entered the square of Istar, whether on foot or in chariot, had either been directly summoned by the mob or had joined it voluntarily from curiosity. These people, by now two hundred strong, were awaiting the development of the affair in an undecisive humor. More of them believed in the divinity of Istar than in the word of Amraphel, powerful as he was. But now, suddenly, there was to be seen, circling towards them from above, a woman's figure, utterly dishevelled, with long hair flying about her and straight woollen tunic impeding her progress, clasping in both arms a tiny bundle, and fleeing, in very evident terror, from those that followed her, one of whom held the goad uplifted in his hand. And as her weakness, her mortality, her too evident confusion, became apparent, the people felt all the old, inherent savagery of their race rise over the lately acquired civilization, and they watched with delight the approach of their helpless prey.

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Istar, as she came nearer the ground, could see the crowd there close up its ranks and draw

nearer the foot of the tower. She realized its attitude instantly, and her heart palpitated fast with excitement. Go back she could not. Keep on she must. And soon she reached the last few feet of the inclined plane, and felt the very breath, hot and hostile, of her one-time worshippers rise about her. She stopped, faltering. Her shoulders quivered in expectation of a blow; for Amraphel was close upon her. The blow was struck—fiercely—and it cut through her garment like a knife, blackening the white skin beneath it. At the same time Amraphel's voice thundered out to all the crowd:

"I bring ye the false witch out of the holy temple of Istar. Do with her as ye think fitting and meet, in reverence to the outraged goddess."

There was a deep, universal cry, a cry of hatred, of triumph, of the purest brutality, from the throng. Istar, looking down upon the massed faces before her, reeled slightly. Then, for her child's sake, with a mighty effort she straightened up again. Knowing not what else to do, she stepped forward to the crowd. A great hand was quickly thrust into her face. Another struck her on the shoulder—but not so cruelly as the whip could strike. A dozen men seized her about the body. Then she lost every feeling save only one, that was more an instinct than a definite idea. She must protect her child. She must save it, while she lived, from the hands of her assailants. She was in the very midst of the mob. Heads, arms, hands, all struggled around and towards her, striking, bumping, pushing her. Her hair and her tunic were torn. No one as yet had threatened her with a weapon; but this, she felt, was only a matter of time; and then vaguely she commended herself to the God whose will had been hers also.

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All at once, however, she felt more room around her. She was in the middle of a small, empty space, about which her own eunuchs stood in a circle, their backs to her, fighting with the men of the mob that sought to reach her. With a gleam of hope, she saw that all were not hostile. Her head swam and the world grew misty around her, yet still she clung to her shred of consciousness, that she might keep the baby safe. And, while she still controlled herself, some one appeared out of the tangle of struggling forms. Some one came close to her side, saying to her, in a once familiar voice:

"Belit Istar, keep to my side, and I will make a way for you through these men."

Istar turned her half-blinded eyes upon the defender, and smiled at him—the golden-haired, the silver-voiced, whom long ago she had sheltered in her shrine.

"I will keep to thy side—Char-mides. Or—I die here. Yet I fear not death. Life—only—is—terrible," she muttered, faintly.

The Greek did not answer her. Seeing an opening in the throng, he threw one arm around her, and, holding his right hand out in front of them both, hurried quickly forward. Istar never remembered how it happened. She saw her eunuchs all around her. She knew little of the angry people beyond. Presently she and her rescuer stood together beyond the mob on the edge of the platform steps.

"Thy eunuchs, I think, will keep the crowd from pursuit. They have been bravely true to thee. Now, canst reach my dwelling, lady? The way is far."

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"To thy dwelling I cannot go. May the Almighty God make thee forever happy! Leave me now. I follow my path alone."

Charmides regarded her as slightly crazy. As she started quickly forward he kept close at her side. "Come with me—a little to the right," he suggested, gently.

She shook her head. "Nay, Charmides, I know the way. It is to the house of my lord that I go. Haste! Haste! They follow me!"

She started forward as she spoke, running in terror down the steps into the square, and turning unhesitatingly into the *Â-Ibur-Sabû*. Charmides kept to her and supported her as she went, knowing not what else to do, not daring to take the child, to which she clung with such a mother-clasp that none could have presumed to ask her to relinquish it. And in this wise they proceeded together up the great road, finally turning into the street of Palaces leading towards the river. As they passed, no man or woman failed to turn and stare at the couple, for surely such a sight as this had never before been seen in Babylon. How long the walk lasted, minutes, hours, or days, or how it was that Istar kept from losing consciousness after the terrible hour she had been through, Charmides never knew. Some of the agony, mental and physical, that the woman was enduring he could read in her face. The greater part of it no mortal could have known or borne, for it was the death of her immortal existence and the beginning of her real earth-life, her life as a human being, a woman without power, without strength, without knowledge of what was to come.

Noon glared over the city as the two of them reached the border of the hunting-park that surrounded Nabu-Nahid's palace. A little farther along was the palace gate-way, with its group of guards in their magnificent liveries. Charmides looked at them in despair, for surely the poor woman at his side would meet with no courtesy here. Such fears did not trouble Istar. Advancing to the first soldier, she said at once:

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"Admit me, now, to"—she faltered over the name—"to my Lord Belshazzar."

For a moment the man stared into her haggard and colorless face, crossed with the red weal of

the whip, looked into the wild eyes, saw the burden that she bore, and laughed.

Istar heard him, saw him, was still and silent for a moment, and then turned dully to Charmides. The Greek's eyes brimmed with tears—tears of rage at his helplessness and unutterable pity for Istar.

"Belit, come away with me. I will keep you till my lord receives you here," he whispered to her imploringly.

Istar shook her head and turned hurriedly to the second man. "I will be taken to my Lord Belshazzar! Admit me to him!" she cried, querulously.

"There is he, then, if you would speak to him," was the jeering answer, as the man, with a grin, swept his thumb in the direction of the first court, just inside the gate.

Istar darted forward to look.

"Thou fool! Now she will scream!" said the first soldier to his comrade.

Truly enough, Belshazzar was in the court, walking slowly towards the gate of his wing of the palace. Istar's eyes fell on him instantly. She smiled a little. Then—she called:

"Belshazzar! Belshazzar—my lord!"

At the first syllable Belshazzar stopped, lifted his bowed head, and listened. At the repetition of the cry he turned towards the gate and came running—running as never before, towards it. The guards, watching him in something like consternation, opened the gate at his approach.

"Istar! Istar! Thou—here!" came in a great cry of love, of anger, of ineffable pity, from the lips of the prince royal. [Pg 308]

Istar tremulously smiled, and held out her infant to her husband. "I—have—come," she whispered, vaguely. Then, as Belshazzar took the child from her, she gave a gasping sob, and fell forward upon the hot bricks at his feet.

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By noon that day Babylon was ringing with the story of Istar's fall and her miraculous escape from the hands of the mob of priests and the people. The tale, from the first appearance of Amraphel and Vul-Ramân in their chariot on the Â-Ibur-Sabû at so early an hour, down to the arrival of Charmides and Istar at the edge of the royal park on the street of Palaces, was in the mouth of every man. But, strangely enough, the beginning and the end of it all, Beltishazzar the Jew and Belshazzar the prince, were never once mentioned by any one. Amraphel in the temple and Daniel in the street listened, each with his own ears, in his own way, to learn how much was known; and possibly both were relieved that the beginning was unguessed; but certainly both were annoyed to find that they could learn no more of the close of the drama than any one. Istar had simply disappeared. Her Greek guide was known, had even been seen in the afternoon walking from the temple of Sin towards the canal of the New Year. But no move was made towards his apprehension, for he was highly valued by the priesthood of his temple, and no amount of questioning on the part of any one drew from him a single satisfactory reply as to the final disposal of Istar and her child.

Nevertheless, Charmides' mind and heart were full. Not until the afternoon had he an opportunity, or, indeed, the wish, to review the great event in which he had played so important a part that morning. All the circumstances had been shoved into the background and forced to lie still in his subconsciousness throughout the morning, while he performed his regular duties at the temple. And only now was he free to let them come once more to the surface and quietly consider them in his homeward walk. First, there was the errand that had taken him to the temple of Istar at that hour of the morning—a message concerning two oracles that must be identical, to be delivered at the same hour at two temples. Charmides had been more likely than any of the priests to win Istar's consent to the arrangement and to the deceit that it involved. And it was thus that he arrived at the temple of the goddess at the hour of the close of sacrifice, to find an unusual and excited throng assembled round the foot of the ziggurat, upon which, Charmides learned, Istar had slept on the previous night. Entirely ignorant of the portent of this mob, the Greek had joined them—hearing only that Istar was still above. From there, in such wise, he watched her expulsion from the sanctuary; saw her struck by the whip of the high-priest; perceived the burden that she bore; and, finally, knew that she was swallowed up in the mob that had been threatening her life. Then, at last, a furious desire for action came over the Greek. He looked around eagerly. On his right hand stood a company of men that were taking no part in the turmoil, regarding it rather with an expression of anxiety in their faces. These were the eunuchs of Istar's household, wearing her livery: servitors that had been willing slaves. Charmides saw that in them lay his goddess' only chance. He rallied them and brought them together by means of a few sharp words of encouragement and explanation; and with them close-pressed around him, he made an onslaught on the disordered throng. [Pg 310]

It was thus that Istar's rescue had been effected. There was little in it that was remarkable; but Istar's endurance in the long walk that followed was certainly little less than miraculous. It was, however, the scene at the end of this walk that had affected Charmides most powerfully. In Belshazzar's reception of her, Charmides had not failed to read something of the history that had made that reception possible. Love for her, this wonderfully fallen woman, helpless, weary, and persecuted as she was, the prince unquestionably bore. She had come to him in her hour of sorest need, and he had not failed her. Could she then, always, in her former glory, have rejected him? It seemed impossible. And at this thought Charmides grew troubled. He could not bear that Istar should be tainted by contact with any mortal. Yet now, alas! he knew that she must be so tainted. With this thought the world grew human again, and Charmides turned his mind to Ramûa, his wife, her who had first made Babylon beautiful to him. In another two or three minutes now he would be with her, for he had nearly finished his homeward walk. Directly opposite him were the palace and gardens of Lord Ribâta, behind whose walls dwelt Baba, that other being whose life had for a moment touched his, and had then flown off again at a tangent that could not but separate them more and more as time went on. For Baba, Charmides felt a lurking tenderness, that had developed since he won his happiness through her; and as he rounded the corner of the tenement of Ut and hastened his pace towards his own door-way, he was not sorry to find three women watching for him in that space—Ramûa, Beltani, and, lastly, Baba herself.

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It was evident that news of the great happening of the morning had already reached this remote corner of the city; for the instant that he was within speaking distance of his family, the Greek was assailed with such a volley of questions as only women could have marshalled under a single breath. It must be confessed that Charmides heard them with something like despair. Yet he knew also that he would do best to submit to the inevitable without protest. Therefore, seating himself upon a new stool in the living-room, he proceeded to utilize the moments unoccupied by women's voices in explaining as lucidly as possible the morning's adventure. Baba alone was silent during his recital. She stood perfectly still, her hands folded in front of her, her large eyes fixed solemnly on his face, listening, with an eagerness that he could not but perceive, to his every syllable. Immediately upon the end she turned, with a rustle of silk and a jingle of golden chains, towards the door. Then, beckoning Charmides to come with her, she led him along for a few yards, and, fixing her gaze upon him, said, seriously:

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"Charmides, you must know that you have incurred danger by this act. The eyes of all the priesthood, of Amraphel, of Vul-Ramân, of Beltishazzar the Jew, will from this time forth be upon you. Take care that, though you have won the love of every woman in Babylon by your act, you do not also receive some mortal injury from these others. I warn you as one that loves you. Remember it."

And with these words, and a nod to her sister behind, Baba let Charmides go, and went on alone towards her pleasant prison-house.

There was no reluctance in Baba's gait as she approached the palace of Ribâta; for the unhappiness of the first months of her new life was gone. In its place had come a contentment that was as near akin to happiness as anything she had ever known. By her own tact and wisdom she had made for herself an enviable place in Lord Ribâta's household. Every one in it, from the first wife to the newest dancing-girl and the humblest slave, liked her. She had never been known to do one of them an unkindness; and none of them had ever borne a complaint of her to their lord. For this, if for nothing else, Bit-Shumukin would have regarded her as a paragon. But my lord had other cause for keeping a close companionship with her after her novelty had worn off. Baba was no fool; and, young as she was, began, under Ribâta's experimental tuition, to develop no mean abilities in the way of politics and political diplomacy. She had begun by having explained to her the unimportant things—dark secrets known to everybody in the state world, and to anybody else that cared to go into them. Finding from these that she possessed that unheard-of thing in woman, a bridled tongue, Ribâta trusted her further, began to make some little use of her in a statesman's way, and found that she had unusual talent in that unusual line. Finally, she had ended by becoming an unflinching necessity to him in his broad outer life. Baba went to houses, knew people, heard things repeated, received confidences that no other woman in Babylon dreamed of. In many cases she was able to save her lord's dignity in a pleasant way. She formed friendships with certain people whom he suggested to her, and obtained from them a world of amusement for herself, and an unfathomable fund of information for her master. She found Babylon to be a seething mass of plots and counterplots, little and great, honorable, ignoble, loyal and traitorous. The government was fighting its enemies with their own weapons, and intrigued vigorously, sometimes in the light of knowledge, far more often in hopeless darkness. Ribâta, as Belshazzar's closest friend, dwelt in the very midst of this world of craft, and how valuable to him and to his prince so versatile and so truthful an agent as Baba was, none but Ribâta himself knew. But it was in this way that life had grown interesting again to the little creature; and it was in this way that she gained a satisfaction in her existence, knowing that she was worthy, that she was serving a great cause well. Indeed, from her heart, in the light of all her knowledge, Baba was body and soul loyal to the king and to the prince-governor of the city. Autocratic as they were and wished to be, it took little understanding to perceive how infinitely more selfish, how infinitely more tyrannical would be the other side, that great opposing element of which Amraphel was the recognized head, and Daniel the Jew the unrecognized but not less important right hand.

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Knowing this religious body as she did, Baba's warning to Charmides had been no idle one; and

on her way home she was occupied in reviewing the position of the man whom she revered as well as loved. It caused her no little anxiety, this plight of his; for, though no definite result of his generous action could be foretold, that there would be some result the little diplomatist was very sure. It was her intention, on reaching the palace, to demand audience of Ribâta at once. But when she came to the outer gate of the zenana she found a eunuch watching for her coming, and he hurried forward to her with the command that she repair instantly to the presence of her lord.

Ribâta was alone at table when Baba came to him. He greeted her arrival with extreme satisfaction, and, before dismissing the slaves, had a place made for her beside him, and food and wine brought for her refreshment. Baba watched the arrangements placidly. She was accustomed to such consideration, though no other woman of Ribâta's household had ever been treated in this way. And when the two of them were finally left alone, she began quietly to eat, asking no questions, forbearing to introduce the topic near her own heart, waiting, without the least appearance of curiosity, for Ribâta to begin the conversation.

On the instant of their being left alone, Ribâta's face lost its expression of cheerful nonchalance and took on the look of one that labors wearily in a hopeless cause. He ceased to eat and drink, and lay back on his couch with a deep sigh. It was many minutes before he spoke, and during that time Baba played steadily at eating, never once noticing his languor or commenting on his mood; for she knew her lord, and she took the only possible method of pleasing him.

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"Baba," he said at last, "we have lost what should be reckoned as an army this day."

Baba slowly lifted her eyes to his. "Istar?" she said, quietly.

Ribâta nodded. There was a little pause, and then he asked again: "You know, do you not, the man that saved her from the mob?"

"Why—thou knowest, my lord, he is—"

"Charmides, thy Greek. Say it, Baba."

"He is the husband of my sister."

"But once beloved of thee?"

Baba looked at him.

"Warn thy Greek, then, that Amraphel and the Jew will not again let any act of his pass unnoticed. His life is endangered, I think."

Still Baba was silent. At Ribâta's words she merely bowed her head.

"And now, my Baba, now hear the rest of the day's happenings. The Great City is coming into the evening of her day. That thing that was Nabu-Nahid's greatest safeguard, because it alone was feared by the priesthood, is taken from us. In the days when Istar of Babylon shone like Shamash in her temple, Amraphel himself laid his face in the dust before her. But now, for many months, yea, since that journey to Erech, her glory has departed from her. I have looked on her long and despairingly of late weeks. This is the end that from the first I have feared. She is become no more than any woman; and with her going our power fails. Yet, Baba, this Istar is wonderfully beloved. This day, in the palace of the king, she was united in marriage with Belshazzar by word of the priest of Sin, who thereby, to all Babylonia, proclaimed her a woman."

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"Wife of Belshazzar!" gasped Baba.

"Yes, verily. And I have not marvelled less than thou. Yet Belshazzar loves her with a love that is beyond approach: holding her dearer than half the kingdom—nay, then, than the whole, I think. I spake out before him of the danger of her fall to our cause, and his answer frightened me; and after that, through the whole day, he spoke to me no more.

"But by the blood of my father that flows in my veins, neither for Istar nor for any other shall Belshazzar lose his kingdom to Amraphel, Beltishazzar, and Kurush the Elamite, till my spirit is fled to Ninkigal, and my blood waters the streets of the city. And till the time when the madness of the prince my brother shall be ended, I alone will uphold the state against her enemies."

He came to an abrupt and thoughtful pause, which Baba softly filled.

"My lord knows that his will is also mine."

Ribâta drew a quick sigh and then smiled at her words. Afterwards he rose from his couch and seated himself on the great pile of rugs and cushions in a corner, at the same time motioning Baba to join him. She went, obediently, and seated herself at his feet, her eyes resting inquiringly on his face, her chin on her hands. Before he began to speak, he placed one hand caressingly on her hair, much as one would have patted the head of a little child, for, in spite of her precocious discretion and level-headedness, Baba always impressed one first with her childlike personality.

"Now, Baba, there is something for thee to do, whereby we may gain much for our king. Thou knowest the woman Bunanitû, and the great house of Êgibi, of which she is mistress?"

Baba smiled. "Hast thou not many times bidden me go to her? And hath she not come here to visit me? Ugh! My lord knows that I do not love her and her race."

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Ribâta smiled. "My Baba, the king's treasury has never in its richest time held half the wealth of

the house of Êgibi. With them is that power of gold without which Amraphel himself would soon be helpless. There, Baba, in that house of Jews, is where more than half the secret meetings of the traitors are held. It is from there, and from the house of Zicarû, near the temple of Marduk, that Babylon may look for its doom to come forth. Listen, then, to me. If any meeting ever hath been held by our enemies—and, by thy goat, there have been a hundred of them!—there will be one to-morrow, either in the monastery or in this house of Êgibi: and I think 'twill be in the last. Their best time is noon, after sacrifice and before mercy, when business ceases and the city dines. Now, there will be a eunuch temple servant that is in my pay in the house of Zicarû, waiting, at the same hour that I would have you go to the house of Êgibi. You must enter it, Baba, as a female visitor to Bunanitû, veiled and on foot, carrying embroidery, or a lute, or something that womankind fancies, creating no suspicion that you come from me or my house. Only greet Bunanitû, and tell her you are come to pay a visit and to gossip with her for an hour. Then, being in that house, keep thou watch. Tell me the men that are to be seen about the place, or, if there is none to see, look for any chance event that may befall to give a clew to the traitors' workings. If you be shut away from the men's rooms, cry out for faintness or with heat, and so run out into the shop where moneys are changed. Or make you any excuse to look and learn—I care not what it may be, or what you do. But, my Baba, for every fact you bring me, there shall be a golden hairpin for your hair on your return."

Baba looked up at him quickly. "My lord will learn in time that I love not gold. I do my lord's bidding for love of his work. Let him not pay me like a servant." [Pg 318]

Ribâta smiled and took up her two hands. "Baba is good, and also wise. Let her bear always in mind that the Achæmenian threatens the Great City; and that before him, if there works treachery inside the walls, I and thou, Belshazzar and the king, Istar of Babylon and thy pale-eyed Greek, must surely fall. I shall not see thee again ere thou go; but the household is at thy command, to do with as thou wilt in preparation for thy adventure."

Then Ribâta tapped her forehead in token of dismissal, and watched her as she jumped to her feet, made her reverence, and went away with her hands folded on her breast.

Though the evening was young, Baba retired straightway, but without any intention of sleeping. Once in her bed she was not liable to interruptions of women or children, who clamored lustily round her in her waking hours. Now she was eager to think out her plans for the morrow, and how best to accomplish the most important mission ever intrusted to her. It was full three hours, and the whole zenana had grown sleepy-still, before at last she turned upon her side and closed her eyes in the satisfaction of knowing that, of all the plans she could think of, the one she had finally decided on held out the greatest chance of success.

Next morning, the twenty-second of the fair month, found the city still wrought up over the strange happenings of the day before. Istar's fall was not a matter of rejoicing to Babylon in general. Many a woman had wept, and many a workman turned silent and solemn on hearing of her expulsion from the temple. In one quarter of the city only was there a universal sense of delight. This was in the extreme southwest, south of the canal of the Prophet, and accessible from the outside only by the gate of the Maskim. This little spot was a settlement of an alien race, and its inhabitants enjoyed a mode of life peculiarly their own. It was the quarter that had been assigned, fifty years before, to the Jewish people, when Nebuchadrezzar had brought them, ten thousand strong, from their far, barren country, to be a menace and a curse unto his descendant. [Pg 319]

So entirely distinctive a life did these captives live, that their quarter was not greatly frequented by Babylonians. But there was one house, standing near the traders' square, covering a large plot of ground, and much more richly tiled than any of its neighbors, that had been and was frequented by the greatest men in Babylon—prince and priest, judge and minister—and the business of which was on a greater scale than that of any similar native house, and which was in the end destined to become famous in the annals of Babylonish history. This was the great banking-firm of Êgibi & Sons; and it was managed at the present time by three generations of the family: Bunanitû, a remarkable old woman of more than sixty years of age; Kalnea, her son, a man something over forty; and Kabtiya, her grandson, a youth in his twentieth year and still unmarried. The establishment that was run by these three to tremendous advantage to themselves, and not a little to that of some others, had become, through the influence of Daniel, the rendezvous for the priestly traitors of the city. Both Kalnea and his son were dangerously implicated in the schemes of Amraphel; and, though Bunanitû had always shrunk a little from the councils held within her walls, her racial prejudices against the reigning family were too strong for her not to be wholly in sympathy with their enemies.

An hour after its accomplishment the news of the fall of Istar had reached this household, through a message from Amraphel himself, who commanded them to prepare for a meeting at noon on the following day—the very obvious consequence that Ribâta had foreseen. The message made no difference in the usual business of the morning; and at noon, as a matter of course, trade was relaxed for the dinner-hour. Few people were in the streets, and no customers haunted the various small shops in the quarter. The house of Êgibi, however, was more fortunate than its neighbors. Between twelve and half-past no fewer than seven men passed in the door of the bank; and, more unusual still, when the last one of them went in, the first had not yet come out. A little peculiar, certainly; but to the single person who witnessed the arrivals from a safe retreat behind a great pile of porous water-jars displayed for sale in the street near by, the event appeared to have less of the strange than of the satisfactory in it. This watcher was a small, half-robed letter-carrier, who had loitered about the neighborhood for half an hour, unseen by a single soul. He [Pg 320]

waited for five or ten minutes after the entrance of the last of the seven, made his way round the corner behind the house, and was presently to be seen dashing round it at break-neck speed, up to the open door of the establishment.

Bunanitû was alone in the large room, and she came to the door, looking out with some anxiety at the small, black creature that stood panting before her.

"Thy business, boy?" she demanded, sharply.

The boy peered up at her, giving her eye for eye suspiciously. "Who are you?" he croaked.

"Bunanitûm Bit-Êgibi."

"Mother of Kalnea?"

"Yea."

"Oho! Then I give thee this, to be"—the boy put a mysterious finger to one side of his nose and whispered so softly that the woman bent over to catch his words—"to be delivered to Amraphel, my lord, in council—if thou knowest the place." And he held up a neat little brick, covered with exquisitely minute writing and elaborately sealed.

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Bunanitûm, growing rather large over the affair, took the epistle with a nod. "I know," she whispered, in return, and the boy, with an answering look, turned as if to go away.

The woman, hasty with her new importance, did not stay to watch his departure. She turned about and started for the back part of the house, leaving the outer room quite empty for the space of three minutes. And during that three minutes Baba brought her plan to a successful issue.

No one saw the little letter-carrier enter the shop. Still less did any one know when he darted out of it and back into the maze of corridors and rooms behind. Here, in a well-chosen corner, very dimly lighted, Baba huddled herself up, to await the return of Bunanitû to her post of duty, which would leave the whole rear of the house open to inspection. Shortly the Jewess could be seen passing quickly along an adjoining hall-way, on her way back to the shop, whither she had been hastily sent by her son. And when she was gone, Baba, with a long breath, left her hiding-place. The most uncertain and perhaps the most dangerous part of her work was over; but the important half of it remained still to be done. She was confident of the efficacy of her disguise; and she was free to move rapidly in her scant tunic with her black-stained, bare limbs, and her flowing hair crammed under a woolly, black wig. Nevertheless her heart beat violently as she left her corner and began to search for the room where the secret council would sit, or for some hiding-place where the sound of voices would come to her ears. She had proceeded nearly to the back wall of the house, and was beginning to fear that the council-room was too well concealed for discovery, when a faint murmur of talking reached her ears. It came, apparently, from somewhere below, and, with the first murmurous sound, Baba stopped short to look about.

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The room where she stood was large, almost dark, and scantily furnished. Its walls, however, were hung with elaborate draperies, and its floors covered with costly rugs. Save for two or three inlaid chairs, with embroidered cushions and carven feet, the room was empty of furniture. But from somewhere, and somewhere below, came that unceasing murmur of conversation. The intruder examined her surroundings from floor to ceiling. Then she looked all round the walls, and finally back again to the floor. Here, on a certain spot, her eyes stopped. It was where the corner of a great crimson rug was turned up, as if it had been hastily laid. And by this upturned corner was a black spot that was not shadow. In the dim light Baba could distinguish nothing very clearly; but she moved noiselessly across to this place, and found when she came to it that the voices had become definite, and she could hear what was being said. There was a square opening in the floor, all but four or five inches of which was quite concealed by the rug.

Without any hesitation Baba threw herself flat down, and then, realizing to the full the risk that she ran, pushed the rug yet farther away from the opening, put her face close to it, and looked down.

Below was a good-sized vault, made, probably, in the brick platform on which the house stood. It was well lighted with torches and lamps, hung with richly embroidered tapestry, and ceiled with glazed bricks of bright colors. Its furniture consisted of piles of rugs and cushions on which, seated in an orderly circle, sat, not nine, but fourteen men, all but four of whom wore the goat-skin. Baba did not know them all, even by sight; but half were familiar figures, and the other half—well, Ribâta should tell her their names to-night, after her description. Those that she knew were Amraphel, Vul-Ramân of Nebo and Nergal, Larissib-Sin of Marduk, Zir-Iddin of Shamash at Sippar, Siatû-Sin, Itti-Bel, and Gûla-Zir, together with Beltishazzar the Jew and his fellows Kalnea and young Kabtiya of the house of Êgibi; and the rest were one more hawk-eyed fellow of the tribe of Judah, and five priests, none of them above the rank of elder.

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In her first downward glance Baba perceived that Amraphel had in his hand the brick letter that she herself had sent him; and evidently its contents had been surprising enough to displace the former topic of discussion and to raise a storm of talk. Amraphel and Beltishazzar were silent, waiting, with more or less patience, for a chance of being heard. After a little time this opportunity came, for the majority of those present were too ignorant of their subject to be particularly instructive; and at last they quieted, one by one, and turned to the place where their leaders sat.

Amraphel spoke the first words that Baba was able to catch definitely, and from that time on there was nothing that she did not hear and remember.

"Now that ye take council with silence, men of emptiness, learn of me that there is little enough danger in the fact, even if it be true, that Belshazzar has taken the woman of Babylon to wife. Answer me severally one by one, if there has been in any of your temples a rumor of such a marriage made by any of its priests. Siatû-Sin—dost thou remember?"

"Nay, Lord Amraphel."

This answer was repeated by every priest present. Then, in the little pause that followed before Amraphel went on, Daniel, with a faint smile, observed:

"Yesterday, at four hours after noon, Kasmani, second sacrificial priest of the temple of Sin, entered the gates of Nabu-Nahid's palace, and drove away again in an hour in the golden chariot of Prince Belshazzar."

Every one looked to Amraphel for his idea of this information. The high-priest only smiled, in slow indifference, and continued: "The woman of Babylon desires, then, to be queen in the Great City. A queen is not a goddess; and yet I say unto you that she shall never be queen. She whom I drove forth yesterday from the temple is fallen ill under her disgrace. This morning at dawn came to me Nergal-Yukin, rab-mag of the king's household, for a charm to ward off a fever from a divine lady."

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Here Amraphel hesitated for the fraction of a second, while a thin smile spread over Daniel's keen face. "That charm—" he urged.

"That charm," said Amraphel, carefully, "was what the great Elamite would have desired."

"The sword?" demanded Vul-Ramân, bluntly.

"Ten drops of the liquor from an adder's fang, to be rubbed upon a prick in the left wrist at sunset to-day."

Baba gasped; but from the men assembled below there was only a quick round of applause.

"By dawn to-morrow there will be no more of 'Istar of Babylon,'" observed Daniel, satisfaction oiling his tone.

"And the Great City is open to its savior," concluded Siatû-Sin.

Now Baba was in a sudden agony to escape, for she felt that the life of Istar rested in her hands. Yet sunset was still many hours away, and the talk that was beginning gave signs of proving exactly what Ribâta had told her to hear. Therefore from minute to minute she lingered on in her place, while the story of treachery and blood-guiltiness was made clear to her, and it seemed as if, with the evidence in her hands, it must soon be possible to have these men put to death without imprisonment and with a mere form of trial. And had it been two centuries earlier this might perhaps have been arranged. But Babylon was not Nineveh, and the power of Nabonidus was not that of the old monarchs of Chaldea; neither was the king by nature a tyrant, or even a strict ruler. And possibly because of these things, and only because of them, these councils were ventured at all.

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"What is the last word from Kurush?" demanded Salathiel the Jew, of Amraphel.

There was a general little murmur of interest, and a settling down upon the cushions as if for a lengthy talk.

"Kurush," said Amraphel, with all the authority of Cyrus himself, "is now in the marsh country south of Tereidou, and from there he despatches a letter to us. Ye shall hear it."

Amraphel drew from the pocket of his broad girdle a clay tablet, slightly larger than those in general use for letters, and covered with neatly pressed cuneiform characters. This, with the aid of a small, round magnifying-glass, always used in correspondence, he read aloud to those assembled—and to Baba above:

"Unto Amraphel, high servant of the ancient gods of Babylon, and to those that are with him, thus saith Kurush the Achæmenian: With me it is well. With thee and thy houses may it be exceeding well. Now I, the king, lie secretly in the country to the south of the city of Tereidou, not far from the gulf of the setting sun. And here, from the east and from the north, the army will assemble about me. The people in the land are poor and ill-content. Little grain have they to eat, and short measure of milk to drink. The king their lord knows them not. To me they turn, in their extremity. Soon shall ye learn of revolts among the dwellers in the lowlands: know, then, that it will be by my hand. After this we will march northward, towards the gates of the Great City.

"Gobryas, my general, the governor of Gutium, is in the north. Before him, in the month of Duzu (June), Sippar and its works shall fall.

"Look to it only that ye hold Babylon estranged from its king. She whom we have feared—doth she bear herself yet divinely? The captive Jews that are in the city, greet them well for me. Tell them that, after my coming, those that open to me the Great City shall know again the land of their fathers and their fathers' fathers. And those of the Babylonians that shall acclaim me master, to each of these shall be given out of the public moneys thirty shekels of silver; but to the

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great that bow before shall be given high offices, honor, and much wealth. And in the month of Ab, Queen of the Bow, shall Babylon know me."

The seal of Cyrus was affixed to the end of the epistle; and the brick was passed round the circle, that each man present might be sure that it was genuine.

Now began a discussion that proved tedious and scarcely comprehensible to Baba. It was about numbers and divisions of men, and was accompanied by the reading of endless lists of names, and the checking of each as true or untrue to the cause of rebellion. And after listening to this talk until she found that it would be utterly hopeless for her to attempt to remember anything valuable in it, Baba rose, pulled the rug carefully back to its original place, listened for a moment to make sure that she was undiscovered, and then, with the utmost caution, made her way to the rear door of the house, which she unfastened, and through which she safely passed. Once outside, in the glare of day, her heart afire with anxiety for Istar, she started away, in a light-running pace, up through the city that she knew so well. Through the Traders' square, across the canal of the Prophet, along the river-bank for an endless distance she ran, till she came to the great bridge, across which loomed the high, blue walls of the new palace.

The sun was swinging down towards the horizon now, and the life of Istar swung with it in its balance, when the dishevelled figure of Ribâta's slave halted at the palace gates and demanded the admission that her disguise gained for her.

XIII THE RAB-MAG

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Through the whole of the day following her expulsion from the temple, Istar, wife of Belshazzar the prince royal, lay in her newly assigned bedroom in the far wing of the palace, in a profound stupor. She was unconscious, apparently, of everything around her—of Belshazzar, sitting at her bedside; of the child that lay wailing on her arm; of the peace and the orderly quiet of this new home. The spell of her mighty shame and woe was over her. She had broken under it like the reed in the storm. Everything that had passed since she was driven by the blows of the ox-goad out into the day-glare on top of the ziggurat, had been but a dim vision to her. Physically, she was very ill. This was not wonderful. But Belshazzar, mad with rage at the whole of the priesthood, and overwhelmed with pity for the woman he loved as only he would have dared to love, was beside himself with anxiety. All night the rab-mag of his father's household, the most renowned charm-doctor in Babylonia, had watched beside him in her room; had repeated prayers and formulæ without number; and had burned beans, leeks, barley, cakes, butter, frankincense, and liquor, till the room smelled indescribably, and Belshazzar himself, resorting to common-sense, ordered a dozen slaves to clear the atmosphere with fans and with pungent strong-waters. In the new air Istar seemed to breathe more easily, and had even moved her lips, though no sound issued from them. Then Belshazzar commanded the rab-mag to depart until daylight, when he should return with new wisdom.

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Thereupon Nergal-Yukin, half angry, half ashamed, wholly chagrined, went forth through the silent streets to the house of Amraphel. Here he was made to undergo a change of feeling. The priest recognized an opportunity in the first three sentences that the doctor spoke, and instantly took advantage of it. He set to work to play upon the alchemist's feelings, and such was his success that presently, by means of sympathy for the insults he had endured and promises of dazzling wealth, coupled with righteous denunciations of Istar as the queen of darkness, of wickedness, of all the vices, the learned man found his price, bent the knee before his preceptor, and hied him back to his den of charms, where, kept in a convenient cage, was an adder, dwelling effectively among the other insignia of this awe-inspiring profession.

Nergal-Yukin did not re-enter Belshazzar's presence that morning; but he sent a slave to say that he was preparing a new and infallible charm, that could not, to be most efficacious, be applied before the hour of sunset. Belshazzar was pleased with the message; perhaps not less pleased because it gave him the chance of being alone at Istar's side all through the day. Not for one moment did he leave or even turn his thoughts from her. Councillors and courtiers, officials and judges, tax-collectors, officers of his regiment, treasurer and usurers, were kept from his presence by peremptory command. He refused food for himself; but he made an effort to force something between Istar's pallid lips—and in the attempt succeeded in rousing her for a moment from her stupor. As he knelt by her side, supporting her head upon his arm, his hand, unsteady with an emotion that none would have believed possible to him, holding the cup of warm milk to her mouth, Istar's great eyes opened and she looked at him. There was a fulness in Belshazzar's throat that presently broke into a sob. Blindly he groped in the realm of prayer for some words into which he could put his heart. And his will rose up in him, till he would have pitted himself against all the powers of hell for the sake of saving the life of this woman who was lawfully and spiritually his own.

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"You shall not die—you shall not die—not die!" he muttered, over and over again.

Then Istar sank back upon her many pillows. The heavy lids once more shut off her wonderful eyes from his sight. Her face was colorless and drawn. He could trace with ease the course of each tiny blue vein in her fair temples. He looked at her hands—so white, so transparent, so

frailly beautiful; and over them he bent his head, touching them with his lips. As he kissed them there came a wail from the baby. Instinctively, half conscious as she was, Istar gathered the child to her side, while he, the man, looked on, wondering and helpless.

Noon, with its breathless, stifling heat, came and went again. An hour after it a slave tiptoed into the room and whispered a name to Belshazzar. The prince's expression brightened a little. "Let him come in to me," he said, softly.

A moment or two afterwards Ribâta noiselessly entered the room.

Belshazzar held out both hands, greeting his friend with such an air of weary helplessness that Ribâta stared at him uncomfortably.

"Name of the great Marduk, Belshazzar, what is come to thee?" he asked, holding his friend at arm's-length and looking into his face with a mixture of sympathy and perplexity.

"Hush! Curb thy voice! She will be disturbed."

Ribâta looked about him with intense curiosity. "Belshazzar, art thou gone mad? What is this thing that absents thee from thy duties? Thou art needed to-day—in council—at the review—" [Pg 330]

"Nay—let others look to these things; let my father look to his own," whispered Belshazzar, in reply, drawing his friend down on the cushions beside him.

Ribâta found no answer to the words. Here was a Belshazzar whom he did not know. He ventured no further remarks, but remained sitting quietly beside his friend—waiting. By degrees, as the silence continued without much prospect of abating, Bit-Shumukin's eyes began to study the passive face of Istar. The nobleman had never before been so near her; and never before, even in the old days when he had seen her, towering in a cloud of silver above the multitude in her triumphal car, had he been so impressed with her divine purity. There was that in her face, marked and mortalized by suffering as it was, that put mortal things far away from her. His wonder at Belshazzar's boldness grew greater. The spirit which could have moved any man to look upon that face with a feeling of equality, daring the hope of making her his own, was enough, in Ribâta's eyes, to raise that man above the level of humanity. He turned to look upon the prince. Belshazzar lay back on the divan, lost in some unfathomable reverie. Ribâta hesitated to bring him back into the present, yet felt a kind of discomfort in the presence of these two strange beings. Unable to contain himself, he suddenly started up, with the idea of leaving the apartment. Belshazzar, however, was instantly roused by his move.

"Ribâta," he said, quietly, "do not go from us."

The friend turned to him, answering: "My lord knows there is much to be done. I go to thy work."

Belshazzar rose and laid both hands tenderly on the shoulders of his friend. "My brother," he said, "for my father, and for the sake of the crown that will one day be mine, I have labored long; and for them I will labor again, even unto the end. But now, for a little while, I tarry here, beside the bed of my beloved, for whose coming I have waited many weary months. Then wilt thou not watch here with me through one little hour? I ask it for the love I bear thee, Bit-Shumukin; and be sure that there is no other in Babylon, nay, or in all the world, that could hold thy place in my heart." [Pg 331]

A wave of emotion that was half wonder swept over Ribâta. Never before had Belshazzar spoken like this to him—never before like it to any man or to any woman. Bit-Shumukin made no reply in words, but he yielded instantly to the gentle pressure of the prince's hand and sank back again on the cushions. Once more he turned his gaze upon the white, passive features of Istar, and, without looking away from her, he asked:

"Dost thou leave her like this, with neither medicines nor prayers? Where is the rab-mag, that he attends not on her sickness?"

"All through the night he has worked over her with charms and incantations. At sunset to-day he will come again, bringing with him a new charm more powerful than any ever used before. The hour of sunset is not far away. Then if she—"

The speech was interrupted by the appearance of a eunuch, who, making his prostration in the door-way, stood silently waiting permission to speak.

"What is thy business? Say it softly," whispered the prince, with a frown.

"May the ears of my lord incline themselves kindly! There is at the gate a letter-carrier that bears a message for the Lady Istar. He bade me seek thee, saying: 'For divine Istar my word bears life. If she heed me not, death seizes her in his arms.'"

"Bring the fellow here, guarded by two eunuchs and bound about the arms that he may make no dangerous move."

The slave bowed and disappeared. When he was gone, Ribâta observed, thoughtfully: "It is well that he be bound. Day by day thy life is growing more precious to Babylon, more desired by the priesthood. By day and night, if thou wert mine to care for, I would have thee guarded." [Pg 332]

Belshazzar smiled a little, shaking his head; and they spoke no more till Baba, fast bound and also gagged, was thrust into the room by two soldiers that moved behind her. The little creature

was dizzy with the heat, covered from head to foot with dust, and half fainting from weariness. At sight of Ribâta she gave a gurgling, choked cry behind her gag, and, twisting herself suddenly from the soldiers' grasp, fell in a little heap at the feet of her lord.

"Baba!" he cried, gazing in bewilderment at the unrecognizable figure, but knowing her posture and her smothered voice.

"Thou knowest this fellow, Ribâta?" queried Belshazzar, curiously.

"'Tis a woman, lord prince, though her name is a man's. I will answer with my life for her fidelity to thee and to the Lady Istar. Let thy soldiers depart—then she will speak," he said, imperatively, beginning to unloose the rope that bound her arms.

Belshazzar, as always, accepted his friend's word, dismissed the guardsmen with a nod, and turned to examine, with some interest, the panting heap of humanity at Ribâta's feet. Bit-Shumukin had removed the gag, and was still struggling with the stiff knots in the cactus-rope. Belshazzar finally cut them with his knife and set Baba free. She rose uncertainly to her feet, stretching her arms above her head. Then, suddenly, she grasped her hair, gave a great tug, and pulled the wig from her head, leaving her own long, black locks to float freely around her shoulders.

"Where didst thou get the stain for thy skin? Thou'rt black as a Nubian," said her lord, smiling at her uncouth appearance. Then he added, hastily: "Nay, child, let us not play. What hast thou learned in the house of Êgibi; and what is thy matter of life or death with the divine Istar?" [Pg 333]

Before she had uttered the first word of her answer, Baba's eyes fell on the form that lay stretched out on the bed. She gave a little cry of astonishment and reverent admiration. Then she cast herself on her knees before Belshazzar.

"May it please the prince my lord to heed my words, for I speak those that fell an hour ago from the lips of Amraphel of Bel. At sunset of this day will come Nergal-Yukin, rab-mag of the great king, to the side of the Lady Istar. He will bring with him a new charm that shall purport to be for Istar to make her well, and that will bring her to her death. Amraphel hath promised the man honor and riches when he shall make a cut upon the Lady Istar's wrist, rubbing into it ten drops of the poison drawn from an adder's fangs."

"By all the gods—!" Belshazzar leaped to his feet. "Nergal-Yukin dies this day!"

"Where hast thou heard this story, Baba?"

"At the council of priests, in the house of Êgibi."

"Say on—all thou hast heard!" commanded Belshazzar, sharply.

Thereupon Baba, seating herself on the floor, recounted to the two men her adventure of the afternoon. The whole council, as she had overheard it, the names or the faces of the men that took part in it, and the letter from Cyrus the Elamite, word for word, she unravelled from the warp and woof of her memory. Her auditors listened in silence, staring into each other's faces, neither of them wholly amazed, yet both strongly moved by this confirmation of their worst suspicions—the suspicions that Nabonidus would not entertain. Baba gave the story in detail, and took some time over it. She had barely finished, and there had been no time for question or comment, when the attendant eunuch reappeared at the door, saying: [Pg 334]

"It is the hour of sunset. Nergal-Yukin craves admittance to my lord and to the divine Lady Istar."

"Come thou hither," said Belshazzar, beckoning the eunuch to his side. "Let Nergal-Yukin come hither to this room," he said, softly, "and as soon as he shall be within, summon thou six soldiers of the guard and command them to wait my call outside in the hall. Let them bring ropes of stout cactus and a gag of wood, and cause them to keep silence there without until I shall summon them. Now, behold, I have spoken. Go thy way and obey my word."

The eunuch departed obediently, and a moment later Nergal-Yukin entered the bedchamber of the lady of Babylon. He was a tall fellow, this rab-mag of the king; lean and withered in body, black-robed, and wearing the peaked hat that belonged to the livery of the royal household. Around his waist was a golden cord, at the end of which dangled a narrow-bladed knife of Indian steel, its handle inlaid with lapis-lazuli and gold. In his hand he bore a golden phial of rare workmanship. His salute to the prince was markedly obsequious, but he regarded the two others in the room with great disfavor.

"Let the prince my lord command every one to be dismissed from his presence. Otherwise my spell must lose its potency."

"These are my friends. Let them remain here," returned Belshazzar, shortly.

"Then let my lord give me leave to depart out of his presence. The work will be useless," said the old man, with something like a sneer, beginning to back towards the door.

But Belshazzar was master of himself and of the situation. He lifted his hand, and the physician halted. "Nergal-Yukin, on pain of death, get thee to thy work. Pronounce the spell; and may the gods take heed of it." [Pg 335]

The words were spoken quietly enough; and yet there could be no disobeying that tone. Nergal-

Yukin's face darkened; but, however unwillingly, he advanced to Istar's side. Lifting over her both his long, withered hands, he began to pray in the Accadian tongue to Nergal, the god of health. Belshazzar, Ribâta, and Baba stood listening stolidly, while the high-pitched voice went on and on, from prayers to exorcisms, and finally into mystic exclamations and phrases. Here the man's manner changed, and he gave symptoms of a working into religious frenzy. His auditors, however, remained painfully unresponsive, and the final "Amanû" was succeeded by a biting silence. It was then, with a resentful satisfaction, that the rab-mag began the consummation of his work. He commanded a basin of water and a fine towel. These provided, he lifted Istar's right hand from the coverlet, and proceeded to wash and dry it during the repetition of further prayers. Then he turned to Belshazzar.

"May it please the prince my lord to learn that this remedy which I am about to apply to the lady of Babylon is the most powerful and the most dangerous of any known to mankind, or to the gods above. To them that are pure in heart it cannot fail to restore perfect health. By it, indeed, the very dead may sometimes be lifted up from Ninkigal and given once more to the light of Shamash. But if the person to whom the magic liquid be applied is guilty of great sin, then is it true that death may perhaps come upon that one. Now wills the prince my lord that I finish the spell?"

"How shall it be finished?" inquired Belshazzar, phlegmatically.

Nergal-Yukin grinned with displeasure and disappointment at having failed to arouse any feeling by his words. "O high and powerful one, with this knife that hangs at my girdle I cut the flesh of the right wrist till a drop of red blood flows therefrom. Then into the wound I pour the dazzling stream from this precious phial; and when they have mingled well with the blood of the lady, you shall behold her rise up and call thee to her arms." He concluded this explanatory speech with an obeisance, and had already turned to the couch again when Belshazzar gave a low call.

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Instantly there was an influx of armed men into the apartment. Nergal-Yukin turned in time to see the entrance of the last one. The next instant he was violently seized by two stalwart men. His cries of amazement were stifled with a gag; he was bound about from head to foot with the unbreakable cactus-ropes, and then, at a nod from Belshazzar, borne out of the unconscious presence of Istar into the hall beyond. Thither Belshazzar and Ribâta followed him; but Baba, at a sign from her lord, remained where she was.

Belshazzar's face was a thing to fear as he bade the guardsmen stand the rab-mag up before him. Nergal-Yukin could speak only with his eyes, but these were eloquent indeed. Terror and agonized pleading were the dominant expressions on the face of the wretched creature. Belshazzar heeded neither one. In three words he commanded his men to free the right arm of the magician. Then, while Ribâta and the soldiers were clustered round, watching the scene in silent fascination, and a scream of terror was about to break through the gag, Belshazzar took the doctor's right hand in his own, holding it in an iron grasp; and with the other he seized the knife that still hung at Nergal-Yukin's side. The eyes of the doomed man were starting from their sockets. Ribâta came forward a little, that he might obtain a better view of the affair. The soldiers crowded close around. Belshazzar lifted the knife and made a long, delicate slit in the back of the physician's wrist. Then, when the blood had begun to flow thinly forth, Ribâta handed his master the golden bottle that had been left on the foot of Istar's couch. Belshazzar nodded his thanks, and, without a second's hesitation, opened it. The liquid that rolled out was thick and rather brown in color. The prince did his work deftly. With one finger he rubbed the stuff all about and around the wound, mixing it with the fresh blood, and allowing none of it to drip off the wrist. With the other hand he helped two of his soldiers to hold the rab-mag still; for the fellow was now struggling so violently that this was not a task for a single arm. There was no escape, however. When the poison had been made to enter the wound thoroughly, Belshazzar tore a strip of embroidered linen from the bottom of his tunic and bound it round the arm, fastening it with a pin from Ribâta's apparel. Then he stood back from his victim.

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"Take this man away, and bring me only the message of his death."

Obediently the soldiers lifted their burden, now rigid and stiff with terror, and bore him like a log of wood out of the presence of the prince and across the court-yard, back into some little-known rooms used only for the most obscure servants of the palace.

Belshazzar drew a long breath of relief. His rage had passed. Only, as he turned to smile at Ribâta, he was slightly pale. Ribâta nodded at him in approval.

"That was well done," he said. "Those that live like dogs, like dogs let them die."

"And now, Ribâta—"

"Now, O prince, I return with Baba to my house. Thou hast heard all that my slave learned of the treachery lurking in the Great City. It is to you that Babylon looks for her defence. Her people are yours. Do with us all as you will. We are in your hands." Ribâta made the lowest obeisance, something not due from his rank to any one except a god; and Belshazzar hastily raised him up.

"It is to thy loyalty, O faithful one, that Babylon will owe her freedom. Baba likewise shall receive her reward. She hath saved Istar's life—that is more to me than Babylon, than myself, than all the earth. Command a litter for her now, and take thou my chariot for thy return. The council of lords sits to-morrow after sacrifice. Then we will speak of the invader. Till then—Bel keep you safely!"

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Smiling, Ribâta turned back into the other apartment. He found Baba on her knees, beside Istar's couch, gazing in ecstasy into Istar's open eyes. On the other side the baby, haloed round with a soft and luminous light, slept quietly. Ribâta was reluctant to draw Baba from the scene; but the child was faint with fatigue, and so, leading her gently away, he lifted her, when they were outside the door, in both his arms, and carried her, all black and dishevelled as she was, out to the gate, where, in the face of a dozen astonished men, he placed her in a litter, himself mounted Belshazzar's chariot, and drove away in it in the direction of the canal of the Four Seasons.

If Baba's day of labor had just ended, that of Belshazzar only now began. The affair of the rab-mag had left him intensely uneasy, and this, coupled with his great anxiety over the sedition in the city, promised a sleepless night. Still, till further news of Nergal-Yukin's state should be brought him, he was powerless to act, and therefore he returned to Istar's room and seated himself there, with his head resting on his hands. The minutes passed unheeded, for his mind was full. He knew that his wife lay near him, and, though her eyes had been open when he entered the room, he believed her still incapable of sight or hearing. Presently, when his head had sunk lower still, he felt the lightest touch on his arm, and he started to his feet, to cry out in amazement as he beheld Istar, tall and white, swaying beside him.

"*Thou!*" he said, gasping.

"The heart of Belshazzar is troubled. From far away come I to bring thee consolation in thine hours of woe," she said, quietly, as one speaking from a great distance. "Be comforted, O my lord! That that is ordained for the Great City must come to pass. Neither thou nor any other can prevent it. But be not troubled in thy heart, my prince. In the end this world shall grow dim before thine eyes, for there will be opened before them another kingdom where there shall be no time, neither any evil-doing. Until the coming of that day, my lord, be comforted—take heart—and be comforted!"

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In that one moment Istar shone forth in all her radiant glory, like some spirit from a divine sunset. And the prince fell down before her on his knees, worshipping silently. But after she ceased to speak the radiance went, and she fainted before him in her weakness of the flesh. So he caught her in his arms and brought her once more to her couch. When she woke again, only Belshazzar remembered the words that she had spoken to him. Yet he knew that the message had come from out of the silver sky, and with this knowledge peace came to him, and he went and lay down upon the divan in the room.

He had lain there for some minutes, his mind filled less with foreboding than with wonder, when, for the third time, the eunuch appeared at the door, this time wearing on his carefully trained face an untoward expression of interest.

"Speak, *Âpla*," whispered Belshazzar, anxiously.

"May it please my lord—Nergal-Yukin is dead."

"How? How?"

"In great anguish. Being ungagged, he cried mightily, and screamed aloud to the gods and demons, uttering curses on Amraphel the priest of Bel, and upon Belshazzar my lord, and upon the king Nabu-Nahid. Thus is Nergal-Yukin dead."

"It is well that all dogs should die. Listen, then, *Âpla*, and do my bidding. Let forty of my runners, attired in their liveries, go forth into the city with trumpets and cymbals, and let them cry aloud through all Babylon the story of the rab-mag's treachery and his end. The name of Amraphel must not be spoken; but the criers shall so word their story that no man can be ignorant of the fact that Amraphel himself prompted this deed out of hatred to me. Listen, then, while I tell thee the story of the sin of the rab-mag, and thou must repeat it as I say it to you, to all my criers."

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Then Belshazzar proceeded to recount, tersely and truthfully, the tale of the attempted assassination of Istar. When he had finished, and *Âpla*, big-eyed and eager, had repeated the words after him, he dismissed the eunuch to assemble the runners, and then the prince, his work beginning to assume definite proportions in his mind, summoned two women to watch over the goddess, and, leaving them with her, went his way to the apartments of the king his father.

Nabonidus sat in his coolest room, comfortably partaking of his supper. A dancing-girl had just finished her postures before him, and he had dismissed her, while his favorite poet was summoned to take her place. Nabonidus' gentle, sheep-like face wore an air of benign content as his hand moved regularly from mouth to plate, and his head swayed to the rhythm of the tune that had been played. The poet was just mounting his daïs and unrolling his strip of Egyptian papyrus when the prince reached the door of his father's apartment. It was really pitiable that all this pleasant twilight delight should be so roughly disturbed. But disturbed it was, as a lake's calm by the east wind, as soon as Belshazzar entered his father's presence and made his obeisance. Nabonidus' expression was more that of resignation than of displeasure as he said, courteously:

"Let there be a couch brought in for thee, Bel-shar-utsur, and partake with me of this flesh of the whirring-bird, and barley, while *Kibâ* recites to us the tale of *Izdubar* and *Êa-bani* full of wisdom." Nabonidus made his suggestion with an air of hopefulness that belied his real feeling; and he was not surprised, however much disappointed, when Belshazzar replied:

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"May it please the king my lord to grant me a private audience. There are matters of great import

to be laid before him. I beg that my lord be moved to grant this wish."

These words, couched as they were in the form of supplication, were spoken in such a tone of command as Nabu-Nahid dared not refuse. But in justice to the son he said that this manner only ever gained for any one, save poets and architects, a moment's consideration with the king. By this method, however, Belshazzar succeeded; and presently he and his father were alone.

Nabu-Nahid had ceased to eat, and sat regarding his son with an air of petulant displeasure. "Now speak to me quickly," he said, in his mildly injured fashion. "The season is too late for lion-hunting; your command over the treasury equals mine; I have at present not one dancer that would please you; and for the matter of soldiers—go to Nânâ-Babilû at Sippar. I am not the commanding general. What, then, seeing these things, canst thou ask of me?"

Belshazzar snapped his fingers and frowned mightily. The fears in his mind might be vague and ill-defined as yet; but when he did consider, in some presentient fashion, the scenes of terror that were soon to be enacted in the Great City, and when he imagined his father, weak, gentle, yielding as he was, swept into that furious vortex of blood and of death, what could there be but pity for the old man and dread for his inevitable end? Now, for a moment, indeed, Belshazzar wondered how it was that his father had held his throne even one little twelvemonth, after the strife that had preceded his coronation. Yet for seventeen prosperous years this one ruler had held city and state together peaceably; and there were few Chaldean kings that had done as much.

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"My father," said Bit-Shamash at last, "it is for no matter of pleasure or mine own affluence that I seek thee to-night. It is for thee, for thy throne, for the sake of thy kingdom, of ancient Babylonia, that I would take council with thee here."

Hearing these words, Nabu-Nahid's face assumed an expression that was unexpectedly complex—a little inscrutable, indeed. "Since what time, O my son, have thy thoughts turned towards the welfare of the throne? Since when hath thy mind been more engaged with affairs of the state than with wines and with feasting, dancing-girls and hunters—thou and thy companion, Ribâta of Shumukin?"

Belshazzar flushed slightly. "My father hath judged me," was his only answer.

Nabu-Nahid merely nodded his head a trifle, and then sat looking at his son with a stupid expression, waiting for him to depart, as at this stage he usually did. In point of fact, Belshazzar had a strong impulse to turn on the instant and leave his father to his supper and his poetry. But for once his anxiety was stronger than his pride, and he fought back the angry taunt that had risen to his lips, and asked, bluntly:

"Know you, O king, that letters of invitation pass from our city to Kurush, king of Elam, to come and take his place on the throne of Babylon?"

"Letters from the hands of Amraphel of Bel and Beltishazzar the Jew? Ay, Bit-Shamash. Think you I do not know my city?"

Belshazzar was first astonished, then inexpressibly relieved. Was it possible that he had so long misjudged his father? Was it possible that this shambling and vacant manner concealed a sound mind and a great understanding? Had he for so long kept his own best self from the king to find out his grave mistake when it was almost too late? He bent his head more humbly than he had ever bent it before to any man. "I crave pardon of my lord," he said. "Behold, I go my way."

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But Belshazzar had not all the magnanimity of the family. Nabu-Nahid suddenly straightened up, and commanded a couch to be moved to the table. Wines of Lebanon and Helbon were brought from the cellars, and Belshazzar was waved into his place with a gesture that admitted of no refusal. The prince obeyed the invitation rather reluctantly. He dreaded the return of the poet, and had no desire now to discuss affairs of state with his father. However, Nabonidus opened such a discussion in a very tactful way.

"Tell me, Belshazzar, how many days is it since this conspiracy of the priests hath been known to you?"

"For more than three months I have suspected it. It is but to-day that it hath become a certainty."

"And the matter frightens thee?"

"Yea, truly, my father. When I came to thee to-night my heart was sick with the thought of Babylon's great danger. But since thou, the king, knowest all and fearest naught, my fears are also laid at rest. The king my father is very great. May he live forever!" and Belshazzar smiled filially into his father's eyes.

"You do me honor to trust in me, Belshazzar," said the king, gently. "Yet do you well, also; for to whom save their king can a people look for their safety? I will tell you how the Great City is to be protected against the plots of her enemies. Priest and lord alike may prove false, and men and soldiers turn against me. I have put my strength and my trust in those that are above princes. Hark you, Belshazzar. When, a month past, I learned from certain watchers whom I employ, of the great plot against the crown, I bethought me long and earnestly of my course. Finally I sent out secret messengers to every temple-city in Babylonia, and from every heavenly house that my hand hath restored from ancient decay I caused to be sent hither to me the oldest and holiest

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god-image. These, to the number of twenty-one, are now in a little temple by the river-bank, where I daily visit them and perform sacrifice before them till the time when they shall move in procession through the city, and go each to his special shrine. And that day approaches; for the city grows uneasy under the seditions of the priests and their oracles. But when my new gods are set up in their golden houses to be worshipped by the multitude in the city, think you not that the first care of these heavenly ones will be the safety and preservation of me and of my line?"

Belshazzar said nothing for some time. It seemed impossible for him to speak. This sudden revelation of his father's incomprehensible childishness, following, as it did, the equally unexpected evidence of his understanding of the situation of the state, had completely overcome him. It was well that the dim, bluish lamp-light made all faces look pale; for at this moment the prince's skin was destitute of color. All his first fears came back to him, added to a new one, that increased the horror of the first a thousandfold. With what frightful disaster was Babylon not threatened? And what hope had she of fighting against devastation under the leadership of a half-crazy old man that had placed an unalterable and inhuman faith in the power of certain blocks of gray and crumbling stone, shaped into images that a child would hardly believe in? Faugh! Belshazzar turned sick with disgust.

"Speak, Belshazzar! What think you of this hope of mine?"

"The king is great. May he live forever!" was the response, given in a tone of soothing calmness. With the words the prince royal also rose from his couch. "Now, father, I go. I must depart from thee," he said, hurriedly. "There is a matter to be attended to. Give me leave to quit thy presence."

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"As you entered it of your own will, so depart," returned his father, in a subdued and disappointed manner.

But Belshazzar, whose feeling was more of grief and pity than anything else, went to his father, took his hand, and laid it upon his brow in token of devotion and obedience.

"Thy head is hot," observed the king.

Belshazzar smiled faintly. "Grant me leave to depart," he urged again.

"Yea, in peace depart!"

Somewhat relieved at the old man's tone, a little quieted by the silence and the dim light around him, the prince moved to the door and was all but gone when the king turned and spoke to him again in a way that revealed another phase of his curious character. "Belshazzar," he said, "look well to this Jew, Daniel. He was a member of the court of the mighty Nebuchadrezzar, thy grandfather. A traitor and a dangerous man is he; but he is a prophet also; and gold will buy him. If, after my death, the city should be threatened with destruction, look to him, if it is possible, for help."

Belshazzar, dully amazed again, yet too weary of the changes of his father's moods to pay very much attention to him, answered this advice with an obeisance only, and then went his way towards his own rooms. But, even as he went, his father's last words rang again through his ears. "A traitor and a dangerous man, but a prophet also; and gold will buy him—gold will buy him!" Thus Belshazzar pondered still.

In his private room the prince found his evening meal laid out and waiting his coming. Food, however, was not his desire; and, letting it remain where it stood, he began slowly to pace his room, up and down, up and down the cool, tiled floor. His fan-slaves watched him curiously. They had never seen quite such an expression on their lord's face. In truth, Belshazzar's brain throbbed when he thought of what a way lay before him to be traversed. Babylon tottered before his weary mental vision; and finally, inexpressibly heavy-hearted with it all, he sat down to eat his chilled supper, at the same time despatching a slave for Khamma.

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The dancing-girl, with her gauze draperies and tinkling ankle-bells, came in to him, followed by her fellow-slaves with drum and lute. The maid had lost neither her grace of movement nor her love for her Lord, and therefore Belshazzar, successfully diverted for the moment, finished his meal more pleasantly than he had begun it. When finally he rose from his couch it was late. The moon hung in the heavens, and the court-yard was flooded with silver light. A group of guardsmen, clustering round a fire, sat chanting charms in chorus. Belshazzar heard their voices with a vague longing for shouts of men, for the shrill neighs of horses, for the rattle of chariot wheels, the clash of arms, the thunderous murmur of battle as he had known it in his youth. If only war, open and honorable, lay between him and Kurush of Elam—well enough. In that he stood his fair chance of winning; and if he lost, it was death at his own hands. The game that he feared and that he hated was the one of underhandedness, of lies, of treachery, of bribery. When a man could be bought for gold there was none to trust, none to feel sure of. And upon these things the prince wearily pondered as he gazed out into the night, wondering, half consciously, whether to go to Ribâta or to seek rest from his mental burden in sleep.

While he debated this point with himself there came a commotion at the palace gate, the arrival of a fast chariot, a peremptory call for admittance, and his own name spoken in a familiar voice. An instant later a slave ran to him with the word:

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"May it be pleasing to the prince my lord, Lord Amraphel, the high-priest of Bel, asks conduct to the presence of the Prince Belshazzar."

"Bring him here to my side," was the quick reply.

The slave left him obediently, and Belshazzar prepared to receive his visitor. Retreating a little towards the centre of his dining-room, he stood with the torch-light at his back and the glow of the lamp too far in front to shine upon his face. Here he awaited the coming of his father's enemy.

Amraphel entered the presence of the prince royal with his usual unruffled dignity. He was followed by two slaves, who stood behind him during the performance of the elaborate salutations. Then they were dismissed, and bidden to await the return of their master to his chariot.

Belshazzar was unattended. Thus the departure of these slaves left the two men quite alone, out of the sight and out of the hearing of the rest of the world. However much the prince was on his guard, his manner betrayed nothing but cold courtesy. This sudden incident had come as a relief to him. Action of any sort was welcome. He was perfectly at his ease, barely polite, little respectful of the age and station of the priest.

With Amraphel it was different. The instant that his attendants departed his air of unbending dignity dropped off him like a cloak, and into his face there came so marked an expression of hatred and of suppressed fury that Belshazzar's eyes, meeting by chance those of his adversary, forgot their course, and remained fascinated and fixed on that other gaze. Simultaneously both stepped forward.

"My lord Amraphel honors me unexpectedly," said the prince, giving the other a free opening.

"It is not to thy honor, but rather on account of thy infamy, that I come," was the reply.

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Belshazzar's lips straightened themselves out haughtily. "Let me summon a seer to interpret thy words," he said.

"My words shall interpret themselves to you. What answer make you to the charge of murdering Nergal-Yukin?"

For a moment Belshazzar was silent. Then he laughed—a clear, ringing laugh.

Instantly Amraphel lost his self-control. Reaching Belshazzar's side in two strides, he lifted his right hand in the face of the prince. Before the blow fell Belshazzar had seized the priest's arm fast in his grip, and with all his giant strength thrust from him the figure of the old man.

"Beware, Amraphel," he said, so softly that the priest just caught the words.

"Hark you, son of the sheep-king, hark you! If within the hour your slaves, the criers of Nergal-Yukin's death, be not recalled from the city streets, not one of them shall be left alive by morning."

"If that is thy thought, Amraphel of Bel, at daybreak to-morrow not a priest in the city shall dare openly to wear the goat-skin and still live."

"You defy the gods?"

"I defy their ministers."

"Then, by all that is holy in heaven and earth, be thou and thine foully cursed forevermore!"

Belshazzar's lips curled again; and again, desecrating all the traditions of his race, he laughed—loud, and long, but not mirthfully.

Amraphel, as he gathered his scarlet robe close about his meagre frame, grew white—very white. His head was held high, and his eyes flashed with a fire that age could not quell, as he spoke his final word: "Be *thou* ware, Belshazzar of Babylon, lest the curse of the gods be given for fulfilment into the hands of men!"

As he turned on his heel Belshazzar's answer came, and by it the priest learned how surely the governor of the city was of his mother's loins, and not of his father's blood. "Thy hand and that of Daniel the Jew, yea, and of him ye call the Achæmenian, will find space enough on my body whereon to strike and strike again, O Amraphel. But see that ye fight as men, and not as dogs. Else, by my faith, as dogs ye shall surely die!"

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Belshazzar hurled the last word after the priest into the court-yard, for Amraphel was now well on his way back to his chariot. The echo of the prince's voice rolled off into silence; and after a little time Belshazzar found himself still standing beside the table, his head bent, his eyes moving vacantly over the floor, while his thoughts were as empty as he felt his words to have been. A little after the interview he sought his rest. And when morning dawned again and he called his slaves to his side, the criers of Nergal-Yukin's death had not been slain; though perhaps in the end that consummation had been better for the royal house of Babylon.

STRANGE GODS^[10]

Nergal-Yukin's death, the circumstances of it, and the blatant proclamation of these things by Belshazzar's slaves, facts skilfully manipulated by Amraphel and his order, threw all Babylon into an uproar. Naturally, the city was divided into factions. The priests and their satellites formed a sufficiently attractive nucleus to draw around it a great body of the common people whose lives at best were only a round of prayers and exorcisms; while all the army, that feared and followed Belshazzar as it feared and followed no god, drew to itself the other faction of citizens loyal to the crown. From the first, however, the priests, who counted also the Jews to a man in their party, were stronger than their opponents. And Amraphel, moved as he was by the two great forces of hate and overweening ambition, worked early and late to increase his majority. He seized every slightest advantage, manipulated it dauntlessly, and expanded it incredibly. His final interview with the prince was regarded by both sides as a declaration of open hostility; and while the royal party was now apparently quiescent, the things that Amraphel would not do to win over to his side a single man, were scarce worth considering.

While Cyrus and Gobryas with their invading armies were still far away in the south and in the north of the country, nothing that would precipitate matters could be done in Babylon. Indeed, a premature rebellion was the one thing that could save the Great City to her lawful rulers; and no one in the city knew this better than its high-priest. It was for this reason only that Amraphel had failed to carry out his threat with regard to Belshazzar's criers. And it was also for this reason that Belshazzar had so openly and so recklessly defied his enemy at their last meeting. Could Amraphel have been irritated past his self-control and so forced into some rash act that would precipitate the rebellion before Cyrus was at hand, the contest would at least be an equal one. But with Beltishazzar at his elbow, and the funds of the house of Êgibi at Daniel's command and Daniel's command only, there was no chance of matters coming to a crisis before their appointed time. For Daniel's whole soul and mind were in this plot; and, whatever doubt there might be about the soul, it was quite certain that his mind was no ordinary one.

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Amraphel's most telling means of influencing the common people was by temple harangues. Every day, after the early sacrifice, a priest would come before the throng of assembled people and talk to them, not of their duty towards the gods and the priests of the gods, but of the falseness and the iniquity of the royal house. These preachments began almost immediately after the death of the rab-mag, the tale of which, with its accompanying moral, was worn threadbare in order that Belshazzar's brutal instincts might be made sufficiently plain to the dense minds of the listening commoners. The fact that Belshazzar held priestly office and a priestly title was of no consequence. Indeed, it became a subject for further revilings. Certainly it could not be denied that the heir-apparent was extremely lax in his religious duties. Scarcely one day out of ten did he appear in the precincts of the temple, much less officiate at sacrifice. Without doubt, the gods were angry with him. How could it be otherwise?

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It was not long before Belshazzar began to feel the breath of unpopularity. When he drove forth into the city few people took notice of him, none did him reverence, a few eyed him askance, and once or twice he was assailed by some opprobrious phrase. He felt rather keenly the disfavor of the people, but made no attempt to remedy the matter. He knew very well the direction that affairs were taking; but he could do nothing but bide his time, and at night keep his eyes from the future, since sleeplessness brings back to no man his wealth. One thing, however, the prince, as governor of the city, could do, under the general directorship of Nânâ-Babilû at Sippar. He could keep the guards of the city in form, and this he did well. There were at this time about ten thousand of the regular army in Babylon, and of these the finest were Belshazzar's own regiment, under command of Shâpik-Zeri, all of them men of Gutium—the province of which Gobryas had once been governor. These, the best-trained soldiers in Babylonia, were loyal to their last drop of blood to their lord. Belshazzar was a fine soldier, iron-clad in his rules, and known to be himself fearless on the field. His men worshipped his physique, feared his strength, and delighted in paying him the honor and obedience that he would otherwise have exacted by force of arms. Thus Belshazzar was seen no longer in the goat-skin, but he made up for the deficiency by appearing at every hour of the day in helmet and shield, on his way either to or from the great parade-ground where the daily reviews of the various regiments were held.

It was about this time, the middle of the month of May, that Charmides the Greek experienced a sudden disgust for his position in the temple and left it, pleading that the illness of his wife demanded his continued presence at her side. Unworldly, improvident, sentimental as his move was, he nevertheless experienced a great relief when he turned his back for an indefinite period on the great House of Lies. For things had been done there that the young Greek could not think of without furious gusts of anger and rebellion. Besides this, Ramûa was ill, wretchedly ill, as the result of a fall that had caused a series of complications over which both Charmides and Beltani were exceedingly anxious. Still, she was in no real danger, and in spite of his statement, Charmides did not spend all of his hours at her side.

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About ten days after his leaving the temple, Charmides had cause of rather a curious nature for regretting that he was no longer in a situation to know the inner aspects of certain things. A proclamation had gone through the city striking astonishment to every heart, and to none more than those of the priesthood. It was to the effect that, on the first day of the month of Duzu, twenty new gods would take up their residence in the Great City.

Poor Nabu-Nahid, reading aright the threatening signs of his own and his son's unpopularity,

believed that the time had come for his great act. As a priest of the highest order he was empowered to command the high-priest of every temple, with the exception of Amraphel alone, that he, together with two Enû, two Asipû, and two Barû, should form part of the great procession of strange gods when these entered the city. Moreover, each temple was to be especially purified and prepared for the reception of a new statue, and henceforth double services must take place in each temple, that both the old god and the new one might be properly honored. The date for the procession was set for the last of Sivân. A document explanatory of the whole matter, and signed and sealed by the house of Shamash, was sent to each of the priests, and to every monastery of Zicarû; and these were also read aloud in the temples by eunuchs, till all Babylon was informed of the king's act, and all Babylon prepared for the holy day.

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That morning dawned like every other morning of the season, in a flush of fierce crimson, gradually melting into the living gold that flooded the sky with a furnace heat and poured a shower of burning light upon the river with its clinging city, and over the yellow desert far beyond. Holiday had been proclaimed, and at an early hour every street leading to a temple was packed on either side with gayly dressed men and women and their children. Charmides went alone. Ramûa could not walk, and Beltani had preferred remaining with her to standing for hours in the glare of the sun, waiting for the procession. Both women, however, had begged Charmides to go and see it, that he might describe it to them on his return. Therefore the Greek took up his position on the edge of the square of Istar, into the deserted temple of which the old and sacred statue of the goddess of Erech was to be carried first of all.

The crowd here was especially thick. Only by vigorous pushing and squeezing, and some very rapid talking, could Charmides find a place for himself. Having reached a vantage-point, however, he proceeded to fall into a reverie—a reverie of a year ago, when he had stood waiting for a pageant, an utter stranger to the city, hungry, friendless, and homesick. He could recall every trivial incident of the day with ease, from Baba and the goat's milk she gave him, to the long afternoon with Ramûa, now for nine months his wife. He had got to a philosophical stage in his dreams when a light hand was laid on his arm, and he looked up to find Baba at his elbow. He was glad to see her, glad of a companion to talk to; and so they two watched the procession together, bent to the dust before the little black images dotting the line in twenty places, and borne each on its golden platform on the shoulders of six eunuchs.

Nabu-Nahid, in white, drove first of all. Behind him, frowning and stiff, and in anything but a pleasant frame of mind, was Vul-Ramân in his car. Belshazzar came farther along the line, standing unconcernedly in his place, his white muslin robe falling to his feet, the goat-skin fastened over his left shoulder. Everywhere he was greeted with murmurs of disapproval; but though he could hardly have failed to hear some of them, his face gave no sign of it. Quiet, immovable, slightly scornful in his expression, he endured the mental and physical discomforts of the day with a nonchalance that would have deceived Amraphel himself.

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The procession left the little temple by the river-bank at ten o'clock in the morning and broke ranks in the square of the temple of Marduk just at sunset, with the last ceremony concluded—Nabonidus' last card played. Twenty new gods would watch over the city that night, and twenty extra sacrifices would take place in their honor on the morrow. Perhaps it was as well that Nabonidus, in his pathetic faith, should not have heard the comments of the tired temple-servants as they worked through the night, preparing for the next day's services. Twenty new gods asleep in Babylon—twice twenty demons at work in the minds of men. Could the outcome of the fast-approaching struggle still look doubtful to any reasonable thinker whose heart was on neither side?

Belshazzar and his father drove home together from the square of Marduk. Weary as he was, Nabu-Nahid was in a joyous frame of mind. He talked incessantly about the success of his great experiment. Secure in the favor of Heaven, he could easily cast aside all fears of earthly disfavor, and his whole person so radiated delight that Belshazzar's mood passed unnoticed, his expression of unhappiness was transfigured by the sunset glare into one as rapt and as joyous as his father's own.

When at last they two dismounted together before the palace gates, Belshazzar's heart gave a great throb of relief. He had that day felt against him all the hostility of that Great City, and though they were his own, and he should be called upon some day perhaps to die for them, yet he felt a sensation akin to hatred for all the people whose superstitious and pitifully cringing hearts could be moved by the priesthood to moods and beliefs inimical in every particular to the hopes and plans of their temporal lords.

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Belshazzar made his way straight to his private apartments and there doffed his priest's dress, commanding it to be carried out of his sight, and vowing that never again would he put it on. Then he donned a tunic of gray cotton cloth and took his way to the seraglio, into the presence of Istar. He found her sitting on the broad pile of rugs and cushions that filled half her living-room, holding the child in her arms, crooning over it as only a mother can. She welcomed her husband with eagerness, however, showing by the light in her face her delight in his coming.

"And do these new gods hold not their high places in Babylon, my lord?" she asked, when, having called for food and wine, he threw himself down beside her.

Belshazzar's answer was a bitter little smile.

"And they were received in silence? Tell me of the image that was put up into the shrine of Istar.

Did the people honor it—did they praise it and bow down before it?"

"More than any other they showed it honor. Ah, my beloved, for my sake the people hate thee! Knowest thou how they hate me? My name is taught to be reviled in every temple. I am an enemy of the priests, therefore am I mocked in the high places. Istar—Istar—I sometimes dream that not much longer shall I and my father dwell in our Great City." He spoke the words lingeringly, with his eyes fixed on her face.

Istar answered the look well. Not a suggestion of fear, not a hint of dread was to be found in her smile. And while her hand caressed the tiny palm of the sleeping child, she said, quietly: "Whither thou goest, dear lord, there I will go. Unto the ends of the earth—and beyond—I will follow thee."

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"Istar! Thou art happy in me?" he cried, impulsively, leaning over and putting his hand to her lips.

The smile still lingered as she kissed the hand; and then, taking it gently away, she answered and said: "Happy—Yea, Belshazzar, so happy that I, too, believe that our earth-time nears its end. I believe that I have found what I sought. It is the love for his fellows lying in the heart of every man that binds him to the greater love of the All-Father. The love of one for another sanctifies every life. Thee and this—my little child—I love."

Belshazzar looked wistfully upon his wife. There were times when she was too far above him for his own content. Yet in her words there was always something that, vaguely understood, stirred his brain to a painful effort to follow her to her height. Now, as if he would hold her back with him, he took both her hands, leaving the child to lie in her lap unheeded, and asked, with a change of tone: "Hast thou been alone through all the weary day, beloved?"

"Nay, Baba of Ribâta's house and Charmides the Greek came here together to me, after noon. Thou knowest the Greek—him whose lyre once you broke before me."

"Ay. He is a temple-servant."

"He serves no longer in the temple. Out of loyalty to us—to thee and to me—he works no more in the statue of oracles, nor does he play at sacrifice."

"Loyalty to me!" Belshazzar laughed slightly.

Istar gave him a quiet look, and her half-open lips closed again.

"Art thou angered with me, O my beloved, for being forever jealous? Istar! Couldst thou but know half of my love! If thou couldst read the terror in my heart—the terror of losing thee and thy love —"

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He broke off quickly as the eunuchs brought in a table covered with meat and wine. It was placed before the prince, and Belshazzar, faint with his long fast, applied himself to the food and drink, and the intimate little passage with his wife was finished.

The following twelve days passed quietly in the palace. Belshazzar withdrew himself absolutely from city affairs, and, beyond going daily to the reviews and drills of his regiment of Guti and the city guards, he never passed the palace gates. Nabu-Nahid, on the other hand, worked feverishly. The state of public affairs was beginning to trouble him. Five days after the procession of his gods he was obliged to acknowledge to himself that his great hopes for their intercession were not to be fulfilled. Just how far Nabonidus' blind faith went, no one, not even himself, really knew. That which was artistic in his nature—and he was no mean artist at heart—had led him into the pursuit of architecture for the love of it. A passion for things of antiquity had caused him to explore the deserted ruins of many a crumbling temple, with results that made the soul of the seeker after knowledge tremble with delight. Many a long-buried library had been brought by his efforts into the light of day; and the religion of Accad of old, with its heroic tales, its prayer-poems, its chronicles of war and the chase, had been opened to his eyes and to those of the scholars that worked with him. The gods of other days had been brought forth from their ruinous shrines and placed in newer, brighter homes. And after these things, it somehow seemed to him that a reward should be forthcoming from his country.

But when Nabonidus came to know that, at the instigation of Amraphel, the new gods were left unworshipped in their shrines, that sacrifices were no longer offered up in the temples, that people were turned away out of the holy places with the word that the great gods were angered by the intrusion of these others, that none of them would heed prayers and burnt-offerings till the strangers were removed from the Sun-built House, then the heart of the king grew sick within him, and suddenly he came to a realizing sense of the power of the priesthood. Councils were held in the palace. Lords, chancellors, judges, and officers from every department, together with deputies from the provinces, met in the palace and were presided over by the king. Plans were brought up, discussed, and discarded. There was only one thing, apparently, to be done; yet the doing of it would involve such political cataclysms that, dangerous as was the position of the crown, Nabu-Nahid still hesitated to force Amraphel from his place.

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At this time, when Adar's month was a third gone, came news of a great battle fought in the south country around Larsam, between the troops of Cyrus and the defending army, resulting in the victory of the invader and the utter rout and defeat of the Chaldees. Before the news of this could have reached the north country, another army—the Persian, in command of the traitor-governor Gobryas of Gutium, Cyrus' ablest general—had gathered about Hit to begin a rapid southward march towards Sippar, by way of Agade. The meaning of this movement was only too

plain. Cyrus and Gobryas, between them sweeping Babylonia from south to north, would come together for their final siege before the walls of the Great City.

This plan unfolded itself slowly before the eyes of the king and his council, and Gobryas was within two days' march of Sippar before Nabonidus was fully aware of the danger. Well might Amraphel and Daniel the Jew laugh together and rejoice at the success of their allies. At a time like this, what reproof for neglect of the gods could be given them by a king threatened with such certain disaster? A month now, at the outside, and Cyrus would be at the gates of Babylon. By then the long labor of plotting and of treachery would be over. There remained only the final stroke, now preparing, and then the swift, clean end.

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During this time, while Nabu-Nahid seemed to be aging a year a day under the pressure of difficulties that he was too weak to avert or to overcome, Belshazzar was living a life of careless idleness with Istar and his child. The two of them knew that the time of their joy of love was nearly over. Both were unwilling that anything should come between them before the inevitable end. How it was that Belshazzar could put away all trouble, all apprehension of the future from his mind, he himself did not know. Perhaps he had been under the spell of apprehension for so long that now, when the dread of it had reached his father, he was empowered to straighten up and put down his load, till he must pick it up again increased in weight a thousandfold. But during the days that followed he could remember his first two weeks of summer as a foretaste of the peace eternal of the silver sky. From dawn to dawn, barring those two noon hours when Istar slept and he rode out to the parade, Belshazzar was at his wife's side. Their thoughts, their dreams, their desires, were alike. There was no need to talk one to the other. The mind of each was to the other as a written tablet; and they read in silence, clasped each in the other's arms. Istar had become very tender, very clinging, very feminine now. Those periods of divinity when her personality became elusive and her mind attained to unfathomable heights were gone. She was of earth, human in her beauty and in her frailty of physique, radiant only with an earthly love. It was Belshazzar that was becoming transfigured—transfigured through his love for her; for his passion had broadened into a power of renunciation; and he showed the woman a glorified reverence, which, beyond her to conceive, had been beyond her to command.

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It was in this wise that their twelve days passed; and on the night of the twelfth of June Nabu-Nahid entered unannounced into the presence of his son, with the decree that ended Belshazzar's dream lying written in his face.

Istar, dressed in robes of deep crimson silk, girdled and sandalled with gold, lay back upon her divan, softly singing to a lute that she played herself. The light from a hanging-lamp fell over her figure and left the rest of the room in shadow. In this shadow, seated upon an ivory chair, was the prince, holding the murmuring child fast in his gentle arms. They had been thus for an hour when the interruption came and Nabu-Nahid entered, bringing with him the atmosphere in which he had been living of doubts and fears, hates and quarrels, intrigues and treacheries, and dispelling instantly the love-dreams of youth.

Nabonidus was not yet an old man in years; but few would have been able to make out whether it had taken fourscore years, or five, to produce his peculiar appearance. He was a vision of white. Hair, skin, hands, robes, sandals, all were white; and which the whitest one could not have told. His face was bloodless, and resembled a piece of bleached papyrus which, having lain in a damp place, had curled up into a thousand minute wrinkles, from the midst of which a pair of dark, dull eyes looked wearily forth. These eyes were the only feature that one much regarded. The others sloped insignificantly into the pallid plain of the cheeks. And Nabonidus' whole mood was apparent in his walk. So dragging, so weary, so despondent was every step, that, as he entered Istar's room, Belshazzar shrank back from his presence in involuntary despair.

Just inside the door-way the king stopped and looked about him. Istar laid down her lute and rose, regarding the intruder with quiet apprehension. Seeing her, Belshazzar, too, came forward out of the gloom, holding the child still in his arms. And his voice first broke the silence.

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"Enter thou, my father, and sit down with us!"

Istar supplemented the words with a little gesture.

Nabu-Nahid listened, looked closely at his son and the burden in his arms, and then turned slowly to the woman, gazing at her for a long time before he spoke. "And thou art she—whom we worshipped," he murmured, musingly.

Istar drew back a little, and Belshazzar took two rapid strides forward. "Dost thou desire speech with me, my father? Let us then retire to my apartments. There we will talk."

"Twelve days hast thou been sought in thy apartment; twelve days hath this been thy abode. Let it then be mine for an hour. After that I will go forth again—alone." There was a kind of strength in this last word that sounded strange from the lips of the king, and to which neither Belshazzar nor Istar could find any reply.

Istar went to her husband and took the child from him, saying, softly: "I will leave thee here and go into another room. Cause thy father to sit and talk with thee. And—if there is need of thee, I pray that my lord will come to bid me farewell before he goes." Her voice trembled slightly, and as she lifted her eyes to Belshazzar's he found them shining with tears.

Her husband gave her the child and would have let her go; but Nabonidus raised his hand.

"Let her take the child, Belshazzar, for it is not meet that thou shouldst sit as a nurse of infants. But as Istar is thy wife and beloved of thee, let her remain here, that ye may both hear my last words concerning Babylon."

"*Thy last words!*" cried the prince, quickly.

"Yea, for I am come to bid ye both farewell. To-morrow I go up to Sippar, which is threatened with destruction." [Pg 363]

"Gobryas is there?"

"To-night he lies six kasbi^[11] north of the city."

"But Nânâ-Babilû and all the army are there. There will be a siege. We will send reinforcements from Babylon. Sippar cannot fall."

For the first time in many years Nabonidus regarded his son with something akin to scorn. "In the twelve days that thou hast lain hidden here many things have come to pass. Sippar is in revolt. The priests of the sun-college have incited the people to rebel against my rule; and they threaten to open the gates to Gobryas. Nânâ-Babilû sends me messengers to say that half his army will fail him when it comes to the battle. It is for this reason that I go to Sippar."

Belshazzar rose, his face alight with eagerness. "Not thou, O king, not thou, but I, will go up to-morrow into the city of the north. My regiment of Gutium shall follow me. There, with those men alone, I will hold Sippar against Gobryas—ay, and Kurush, too, if—"

"Many things I have known thee do, Bel-shar-utsur; yet boaster wert thou never before. If thou know it not, my son, then I tell thee now, for it is well that thou shouldst learn it from my lips, Babylonia hates thee—for thy arrogance, for thy strength, for thy will, for sacrilege committed often against the gods; above all, for thy tyranny over the priests. If thou shouldst set forth to Sippar, thy life would not endure a single day. And the regiment of Gutium must stay in Babylon. It is in them that the Great City puts her trust. Thou, also, as governor of the city, must be here to lead them. I came not to thy presence to be taught, but rather to talk with thee upon thy position here."

Belshazzar stood silent, flushed with chagrin, yet in his heart acknowledging the truth of his father's words. Moreover, there was in his father's manner something that had not been there before. Beset as he was on every side, Nabu-Nahid had suddenly become a king. Istar perceived it and marvelled; and, though she did not speak, the old man found sympathy in her presence. Belshazzar forced himself at last to ask, in a subdued tone: [Pg 364]

"Where wilt thou go in Sippar, O my father? Into the household of Nânâ, or to the river-palace?"

"Neither of these places. I shall go to the priests' college. It was there that my youth was spent. Five years ago I dwelt there through the summer. When Nitocris died, I went there after the month of wailing. It hath long been a refuge to me. I will seek it again. If I have yet any power in the world, it is there that I shall find it."

Belshazzar nodded thoughtfully. He recognized the truth of his father's words; yet he was only beginning to realize the danger of this desperate journey. It came over him again, in a vast wave, how great were the straits in which his city lay. There seemed to be nothing for him to say, so completely was his father master of the situation. And presently Nabonidus, with a faint sigh, lifted up his voice again:

"Belshazzar, thou seest surely the danger that all are in. Of my own free will I go forth to Sippar; yet I have little thought that I shall return thence again. All things are in the hands of the great gods. If it is decreed that I perish at the hands of my enemies, I pray only that Ânû will hold for me a place in the silver sky. Through seventeen years I have ruled over the Great City, and in that time I have never willingly wronged any man. Why it should be that men wrong me, I know not; and I ask not.

"Thou, my son, art trained to the thought of ruling over the mighty kingdom of the Chaldees. I charge thee only that if word of my death reach thine ears, rule over thy people and mine as a brave king and not a cruel one. In the years to come let thy people look to thee confidently and in love. Be just with all; and let none know thee in hate." [Pg 365]

"Thou, Istar of the skies, who hast dwelt as a goddess in the holy temple of Ê-Âna, and art now become a princess of the king's house, if in time thou art made queen of Babylon, let not thy heart beat with pride. Love thy king. Bear his children and rear them in temperance and peace. Open thy lips to no words of folly. Unveil thy face before no man. Be the faithful servant and companion of him who holds thee dearer than all others. And, having heard my bidding, hold also my memory in reverence.

"Behold, I have said my say, and I go forth. On the morrow, Belshazzar, thou wilt be master in the palace. Take up thy duties, and leave the child to its mother's arms. Now Ânû, Ea, and Bel, the three lords of the gods, keep our fortunes, our lives, and our hearts in safety evermore!"

Nabu-Nahid held out a thin, white hand to each of them, Belshazzar and Istar, his children, and each of them pressed it reverently to brow and breast. Then the old man threw the corner of his white mantle once more over his shoulder, and, with a stateliness born of his newly royal spirit, departed from the room.

Istar and Belshazzar saw him go in silence. Their own days of happiness were at an end; but he who had ended them had given them both the desire to meet the veiled future in a manner worthy of their God and of the king that went before.

XV SIPPAR

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Sippar, the northernmost city of Babylonia, lay a day's journey from the capital. Although five Sippars could have been placed within the towering circuit of Nimitti-Bel, and room have been left for Ur besides, still, thirty thousand people, besides Shamash the sun-god, made it their home. Nebuchadrezzar, the great king, had thought it a town of no little importance; for he had expended upon it as much money as the treasury held and his conquered nations would give for tribute, in making those vast reservoirs and the machinery by means of which the course of the river Euphrates could be turned out of its channel and into Sippar, and thence sent forth into a thousand cross-country canals, leaving the river-bed, for the rest of its southward course, as dry as a brick. On account of these vast works of primitive engineers, the little place had for the past fifty years been famous from Agade to Terredou, from Kutha to the desert; till, from being a dilapidated mud-village, its pilgrim visitors had turned it, with their yearly wealth, into a well-built and well-kept city clustered round three celebrated buildings—the astronomical ziggurat, the temple of the sun, and the college of the Chaldees.

These last could be grouped under one head, since all three of them were ruled by one master—not Shamash, but the high-priest of Shamash, the first astronomer of the kingdom and the president of this college of sciences, and these combined dignities caused him to be known as the first priest in the kingdom. As a matter of fact, the religious house and its attachments were as old as—a little older than—the city of Sippar. Sun-worship had been instituted here as long ago as tradition knew; just as moon-worship began in Ur, according to Berossus, about thirty thousand years before the day of the Mighty Hunter! The house attached to the temple for the purpose of training its priests had gradually, through three or four centuries, come to be the great school of education for the priests of all Babylonia. It was the home of tradition and of sedition; the breeder of anti-monarchical ideas, the advocate of a hierarchical government. Nabonidus' father, a member of this college and high-priest of a Babylonian temple, having married the daughter of Nebuchadrezzar, made double claim to the throne of Chaldea; and, though he never came into the place of his mighty father-in-law, yet his son, the young Nabu-Nahid, educated in his father's college and early admitted to the priesthood, was brought up in the full belief that he was king by right of Heaven. Five years on the throne had changed him in many respects. Amraphel had come down from Sippar to administer to Bel-Marduk, and to keep watch over the general priesthood and the ruler of the Great City; and Nabu-Nahid had grown more accustomed to the crown than to the goat-skin. Moreover, the education of the prince royal was continued along very unpriestly lines. Therefore, though the king had never entirely severed his connection with the great institution where he had spent his youth, his attitude towards it was indeterminate, and its feeling for him one of well-disguised but none the less bitter hostility.

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At this time of the middle of June in the seventeenth year of the king's reign, Sippar was in a frenzy of excitement. The town was filled to overflowing with troops assembled a month ago from every city and village within a radius of sixty miles. Nânâ-Babilû, commander-in-chief of the army, was lodged with Sharrukin, governor of the city; and these two men were loyal, heart and soul, to the king. As a consequence, they were also bitterly inimical to the priesthood. The college, on the contrary, bristling as it was with full-fledged priests and half-fledged students, waited to give Cyrus himself, or Gobryas by proxy, a royal welcome. The men of the army were divided into factions. As for the rest of the city, it was a little Babylon in its general uneasiness and disturbance.

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Three weeks after the home army occupied Sippar, came word of the rapid advancement of Gobryas from the northeast; and the town was hurriedly prepared for a siege. Finally, on the night of the thirteenth, the arrival of two despatches, one from the north, the other from the south, brought consternation to the far-seeing mind of Nânâ-Babilû, and a dramatic sense of triumph to the members of the college. As the news became known in the city, the town quickly took on an air of festivity. The night was lighted by bonfires. The streets were alive with people. A great clamor of singing, of shouting, of drinking, and general riot rang through the twisting streets. And men, women, and children, soldiers and citizens, were still up and dressed in holiday garments, when, at dawn on the morning of the fourteenth of the month, Nabu-Nahid drove in at the southern gate of the city.

Sharrukin the governor, Nânâ-Babilû, and Ludar Bit-Shamash, the sun-priest, each in his state chariot, each the acme of stiff courtesy, came together at the gate to greet the king their lord. The governor and the general regarded the arrival of the high-priest with no little surprise and some resentment. Sharrukin's palace had been carefully prepared for the reception of the royal master; and his chagrin at the idea of Nabonidus' going to lodge at the college of the Chaldees, overcame his appreciation of the policy and the daring of that act.

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Nabonidus came attended by a very small suite. He had travelled from Babylon with no more pretension than any petty nobleman. A charioteer drove him, but he himself held his umbrella

over his head. He was dressed in the same simple white robes in which he had bidden his son farewell. His retinue consisted of two chariots, containing his secretaries and his favorite slave, while a group of six horsemen followed. His manner, on arriving, was as simple as his dress. Seeing Sharrukin and Nânâ-Babilû, his mild eyes lighted with pleasure; but it was to Ludar that he gave his first greeting. The little party proceeded slowly through the principal streets of Sippar on its way to the college, Nabonidus and Ludar first, side by side in their chariots, the governor and general just behind. Nabonidus' manner was unemotional, rather matter-of-fact. Ludar himself never dreamed how closely the king was watching the effect of his coming on the people, and the nature of his reception by them. Certainly his path was thronged—and by townsmen only. The soldiers had been ordered to their barracks and were not to appear till the afternoon's review. As they proceeded, however, Nânâ began bitterly to regret that at least one loyal regiment had not been scattered among the people with the command to force their neighbors into giving the customary loyal greeting to the king. Silence, utter, unbreakable, significant, reigned over the crowd. A thousand black eyes were every moment fixed unwinkingly on Nabonidus, but not a mouth was opened to speak a welcome to him. Here and there, indeed, was the suggestion of a muttered threat that came quickly to the ears of Ludar. But whether the king heard, or, hearing, understood these expressions, no one could tell.

Shamash was scarcely an hour up the sky when the four chariots and the little guard drew rein before the gate of the great college, and Nabonidus entered the institution between two long lines of white-robed priests, who gave the salute to Patêsi when he passed. [Pg 370]

Nânâ and the governor left their lord at the gate, with the understanding that they should return to escort him to the review of troops early in the afternoon. Ludar alone accompanied the king to the room assigned to him—the room in which he had passed his youth—a small, oblong, white-tiled place, with a high image of Shamash at one end of it, and two tiny, square windows high in the opposite wall. A narrow bed, two stools, an ivory chair, and an immovable table, furnished the little place; and the king, seeing it again after some years, looked about him with a faint smile of pleasure.

"Is it pleasing to the king that he should be thus humbly lodged?" inquired Ludar, behind him. "Or will he choose to occupy the royal apartments that are at his command?"

"The king, Ludar, is no less a king because he lives humbly. Let this pleasant place be my abode while I am here."

Ludar wondered for a moment whether the king had intended the double meaning in his words; and, not knowing, he yet resented the possibility. His voice, however, was no less smooth and quiet when he said again: "It is near the hour of sacrifice in the great temple, father king. Will you attend it, or is it fitting that you sleep after the journey?"

Nabonidus sighed inaudibly, but his eyes never strayed to the couch. "I come to the sacrifice, Ludar. Yet first bid them bring me milk from the goat to be offered for sacrifice, for I need refreshment after the weary night. Then let my slave bring to me two jars of water, that I may make my ablutions, removing from my body the dust of the way and the sand blown up from the desert. Then I will come to the sacrifice."

Ludar, unsuccessful in his scheme of petty torment, left the room, smarting under the indignity of being asked to carry orders to a slave—orders that, for reasons of policy, he could not disobey. His only method of revenge was to prolong the sacrifice for two weary hours, while Nabonidus, faint for food and dropping with weariness, was obliged to stand over the sacrificial altar, chanting Sumerian prayers and feeding the flames with oil, while the savory goat's flesh slowly broiled before him. [Pg 371]

At ten o'clock, however, he was able to make a dignified retreat from his religious duties; and then, reaching his own room, and putting his faithful eunuch on guard at the door, he left an order that he should be awakened only on the arrival of Nânâ-Babilû, when that dignitary came to escort him to the review of troops. This would be about two hours after midday; and until that time Nabonidus threw himself down upon his couch. The tired eyelids closed over the tired eyes. For a little time earth-troubles faded from him, while in his dreams the beloved dead were restored to him again.

When he awoke, Nânâ was at his side, looking down at him solemnly, his arms folded across his breast. The king started up, annoyed at having been left undisturbed for so long. The room was wrapped in twilight, and the face of the visitor was in shadow. Something in his general's manner, or perhaps in his attitude, caught Nabonidus' attention, and presently, having risen from his couch, he said, tentatively:

"You are late—very late, Nânâ. Evening is upon us. Surely the review—"

"There was no review, Nabu-Nahid, my lord. I bade thy servant not disturb thy rest. There was no need. I came to quiet thy fears—if, indeed, there is fear in thee. Yet Chaldea knows thy race for a brave one."

"Speak, Nânâ—speak! These words of thine come strangely to me. Or do I dream?"

Nânâ smiled grimly. "There is no dream in this, O king, that Gobryas and his army of Medes and Persians are encamped before the city, and that half my troops refuse to obey my commands." [Pg 372]

Nabonidus went back to his couch and seated himself on the edge of it. "At what hour did the

enemy come?" he asked, quietly.

"At four hours after sunrise, about the time for the close of the sacrifice, they were observed by the men in the north watch-towers. They marched around the city, out of the reach of arrows, and are now encamped before the south gate."

"And there has been no move to draw them into battle? There has been no sortie? The old form of war—"

Nânâ-Babilû bent his head upon his breast, and all of a sudden Nabonidus came to himself and realized their situation. Before the slow, orderly procession of thoughts that passed through his mind he did not lower his head nor take his eyes from the form of his general. After a little while he rose again, without any appearance of agitation, crossed the room, pushed aside the curtain of the door, and gave certain orders to the statue-like eunuch who waited before it. Then, returning, he sat down in the ivory chair to wait, while, in obedience to a gesture, Nânâ took one of the tabourets at a little distance from the bed. Then the two men sat together, waiting silently. Presently a slave entered the room bearing two lighted lamps, which he hung upon their accustomed hooks in the wall. In the new light the king turned to his officer.

"When have you eaten?" he said, kindly.

"A little before dawn to-day, lord," was the reply.

"Bring thou food and wine for both, then," commanded the king; and the eunuch, bowing, left the room.

When they were alone Nânâ's figure drooped back into its place; but the king, with a sudden nervous spasm, got up and began jerkily to pace the room. The general's eyes followed his movements questioningly, but for some moments Nabonidus did not speak. Then, very suddenly, so that his companion started, he burst out:

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"Thou, too, Nânâ! Thou, too, Nânâ-Babilû! Dost thou also betray me?"

"My lord!" The commander sprang to his feet. "My lord!" he said again.

"Tell me truly, tell me plainly," went on the king, tumultuously, "is there left in my kingdom one man that I dare trust? Is there still one that I know to be true?"

Nânâ-Babilû looked at his king straightforwardly, grimly, honestly. "My life belongs to the kingdom, to thy house," he said. "And in my ranks of men there are many to be trusted. But there are also those that have taken the bribes of Ludar and the college. Therefore the true from the false among my own I cannot tell. How many there are of the one, how many of the other, I do not know. When it is necessary we will strive with our lives to defend the city; but how it will go with us, only the great gods know."

Nabonidus heard him and sighed. He could not but believe this man, this friend, this faithful servant of his; and his moment of passion was over. As he came back to his chair three slaves entered the room, bringing with them trays of food and a jar of wine. These were placed on the fixed table, and a light couch was brought in and set before it for the king. Nânâ was supposed to sit in his lord's presence. When at length the slaves had been dismissed, Nabonidus lay down at table with an air of mild pleasure at which Nânâ stared a little. Nabonidus had, indeed, a reputation for courage principally because of the apathetic manner that invariably came to him in times of real stress. And yet Nabonidus realized to the full the gravity of his position.

"Nânâ," and there was the shadow of a smile in the king's face—"Nânâ, if it comes that the city should fall, how wilt thou defend me from the blood-thirsty Gobryas?"

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"O King, I would have spoken with thee on this matter, for thou, like all those in Babylonia, art in great danger. If Gobryas knows that thou art in Sippar the city will surely be assaulted, and will as surely fall. Therefore it is Sharrukin's wish, and mine, that, for thine own sake, thou shouldst leave Sippar secretly as soon as possible—to-night, if thou wilt. A disguise may be sent here to thee. Thine own guard shall follow thee; and I think thou canst still take the road to Babylon without undue risk. But if thou wait—wait till Gobryas learns thy presence here—thou and Sippar, ay, and thus Babylonia, are lost."

"I and Sippar, but not Babylonia, Nânâ. Bel-shar-uzzur rules over the Great City now, and he is stronger than I. He will make a good king for this troubled land. For me—éhu! I am full of years, and weary—weary for the silver sky. Matters it greatly how soon I go? Nay! Speak no more of it. I forbid it, and I am the king. Tell Sharrukin that I remain in Sippar—until the end."

Nânâ, daring to say no more, looked regretfully into the faded eyes of the old man before him. Of every one that he had ever known, Nabonidus was the last whom he would have expected to take this attitude. But eddying shallows sometimes hide treasures as rare and as beautiful as those that lie in the deep, smooth-flowing waters of greater streams. This little pearl of courage, then, was not less admirable because it was the treasure of a brook rather than of deep river or the sea. And Nânâ tried no more to persuade the king to leave Sippar, though, indeed, he felt what the end must be.

The conversation, when it revived between them, strayed away into winding paths, through Nabonidus' fads of poetry, archæology, and architecture, to the inevitable highway of priestcraft. With this road Nânâ was as familiar as the king, knowing more of its detail in this part of the land

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than his master.

"Let it be forgiven that I ask of thee a question, O king! Hast thou faith in thy safety in this house? Dost thou believe that Ludar may be trusted to keep thy person from harm?"

Nabonidus looked at his companion thoughtfully. "To this house I came," he said, "because I would have defied its dwellers. Now, indeed, that Gobryas is before the city, my safety is not assured. Yet here I will remain."

"Ludar—knows he that I am here?"

"I do not know. Let us call Ludar hither, Nânâ, and speak with him of Gobryas."

"Thou wilt never read Ludar's mind by his words, O king. Yet—let him be summoned."

"Kudashû!" shouted the king, accordingly, and at the cry the waiting eunuch came quickly in. "Kudashû, bear word to the priest Ludar that I would talk with him. Let him return with thee here."

There was a prostration and an exit, and then silence. Neither the king nor Nânâ said anything till, ten minutes later, the slave returned alone.

"Ludar follows thee?" asked Nabonidus, quickly.

"May the king regard me with favor—Ludar is not in the college. He is gone forth into the city, none knows why."

The man was dismissed with a nod, and the two were left alone again. Presently Nânâ rose and made his obeisance.

"Lord king, I must go forth. The hour is late, and I have not yet numbered the night-guards. Before I go—let it please thee to take up thy abode from to-morrow in the palace of Sharrukin. Everything there was prepared for thee. Here, with Ludar, thou art not safe. If thou wilt not escape from Sippar, come thou and take up thy dwelling with those that regard thee with loyalty and devotion." Nânâ was not an emotional man, but the feeling in these words was genuine, and Nabonidus was touched.

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"The gods send thee peace of heart," he said, gently.

"My lord king will not come?" persisted the soldier.

Nabonidus shook his head with a faint, stubborn smile, and, a moment later, he was alone. For some time after his general's departure the king sat looking vaguely into space, his lips straightening more and more and the lines round his mouth growing stern. Presently the eunuch glided quietly into the room and took up his position by the door, standing there as he was trained to do when the king was alone. Nabu-Nahid regarded him reflectively for a moment and then said:

"Kudashû, Ludar and Nânâ are gone into the city. I also will go. Bring to me my mantle, and come thou behind me. I will behold Sippar by night."

Kudashû obeyed promptly, but a few seconds later, as the king was donning his white coronet and cloak, he ventured to say: "O king, live forever! Let me summon for thee some of the soldiers of thy guard, that they may follow thee on thy way."

"Is thy body weary, Kudashû?"

"Nay, lord my king; but my arms are weak to strike for thee."

"By Ninip! is the whole world waiting to slay me? Stay thou here, then, with thy arm, weak one! I will go alone."

"Nay, nay, father of Babylon! I go gladly. Yet, fearing for thy safety, I—"

"Be silent, foolish one. I go alone. Behold, I have spoken. It is my will."

And in the face of plea, protest, and remonstrance, go forth alone Nabonidus did, into the city of Sippar.

The streets were quiet. Early though it was, lacking yet two hours to midnight, few towns-people were moving about. A general weariness had followed the merry-making of the past night, and this, added to the feeling of solemnity attendant on the actual arrival of the long-expected invading army, had closed the doors of many a house at an unwonted hour, and caused citizens of an ordinarily convivial temperament to betake themselves to an early couch. Most of those abroad in the streets were soldiers, on their way to or from the watch-towers. It was a curious condition for the first night of a siege, and Nabonidus could not but wonder, as he proceeded, at the extraordinary calm of the people; for he had known many a beleaguered city, but never one that presented a spectacle of such quiet on its first night of defence.

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The night was fair, and with the coming of darkness there had sprung up a faint breeze that came from the east, across two rivers, bearing with it a breath of cooling fragrance. The moon was just past its second quarter and hung suspended, in a soft, golden aureole, over the western walls of the city. By its light the houses and towers of the town stood out in wavering outlines against the

grayish, star-strewn sky. The stillness that wrapped the city trembled, when, occasionally, it was pierced by a distant shout of laughter or a command called out by one of the guards on the walls.

Nabonidus went on and on, unheeding the distance that he traversed, allowing himself to be permeated with the night. The spotless white of his robes caused him to be taken for a priest by the few whom he passed. None offered to molest him. None gave him more than a fleeting glance as he went along. After what he could hardly realize had been an hour of walking, he found himself standing before the great south gate of the city, through which he had come that morning. It was closed now, and guarded with soldiers, some of whom stood or lay on the ground before it, while others could be seen on top of the wall, walking to and from the watch-tower, whence the confused camp of Gobryas' army could be made out across the plain. No hostility had as yet passed between besieged and besiegers. Not an arrow had been shot, not a javelin hurled.

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The king stood off at a little distance from the gate, reflecting on the scene before him. Presently there came a shout from some one outside the gate, a word that was heard and answered from inside. There was a question from the captain of the watch, to which an answer, inaudible to Nabonidus, was returned. Then the small door in the gate opened. A figure appeared from outside, and at sight of it Nabonidus moved swiftly back into the shadow of the wall. The door was closed and barred again. He who had come in paused to place something in the hand of one of the soldiers. Then, without a word, he moved rapidly off in the direction from which, a little while before, the king had come. Nabonidus stared after him for a moment. His thoughts were in a whirl. Considering all that he had known before, this incident had an unnecessarily strong effect on him. It was only by means of a physical effort that he finally pulled himself together and started on his return, a hundred paces back of that other. In this fashion the two traversed the length of the city, arriving at the college of the Chaldees in the same relative positions as those in which they had started.

When, a few minutes after midnight, the king re-entered the building and turned up the passage leading to his room, he found Ludar, wrapped in a gray cloak, standing in the door-way talking with Kudashû. He hailed Nabu-Nahid's appearance rather effusively.

"O king, live forever. What imprudence does he commit that wanders abroad at night in the city streets!"

"And thou—wast thou guarded on thy way?" inquired the king, rather sharply.

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"Nay, truly. But for me there is no danger. I am—"

"You say well, Ludar. For you, indeed, there is no danger! Shamash guard your sleep!" And with this curt good-night, Nabonidus brushed past the priest, closed the curtain of his room, flung off his mantle and coronet, and threw himself down upon the chair that still stood before the brick table. He was in a state of tremulous anger, of discouragement, of heart-sickness, and his head drooped lower and lower, and his hands clasped themselves on the table before him in the tightness of mental pain. The light from the still burning lamp above his head fell over his white figure, and a ray of it glinted off a jewel that hung on a thin, golden chain from his neck. A refracted ray of this presently shone in his eye and caused him to look down upon the gem that he was accustomed to wear inside his tunic, next his skin. It was a charm—a holy charm, blessed and consecrated to be a sure protection against all bodily disease or danger. In some way, the fact that it came to his sight now, unexpectedly, seemed an omen of good-fortune; and with a brow less clouded, the old man rose, took the jewel in his hands, and, falling on his knees before the image of the sun-god in his room, poured forth a piteous prayer for rest and peace. And the sun-god heard him doubly well.

It was not till early dawn began to peer from the east that the great king, seeking his narrow couch, dropped into an untroubled sleep.

The following day, the fourteenth of the month, was a busy one. Nabonidus again conducted the sacrifice. Then he returned to the college and spent two or three long hours with a class of acolytes of the highest order of embryonic priesthood. The noon meal he partook with Ludar, and immediately afterwards was driven in his chariot to the house of Sharrukin, where the afternoon passed quickly in a council over military affairs.

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It was half an hour to sunset when the king returned to his room in the college and commanded his evening meal. He was drooping with fatigue, as the result of his short night and his crowded day. Kudashû, therefore, was ordered to refuse admittance to any one that should seek audience with the king that night. After a change of garments, a bath, and more prayers to Shamash, the king lay down on his couch, much refreshed in body and mind, and eager for the food that was presently brought him. He ate in the twilight, for that hour of the day always brought calm to his spirit, and even at the close of the meal, when the room was nearly dark, he still refused lights, but lay, immovable and alone, with the ghost of the dead day whose golden bier had been borne across the shadowy threshold of the night.

Gradually the king sank into a profound and vividly imaged reverie. His thoughts went back into many long-past scenes of his youth and young manhood; and, as he afterwards remembered, the last of these was something apart from his own life. In the twilight there rose before him clearly and distinctly the room in which he had said farewell to his son. Here, under the glow of the hanging-lamp, clad in her crimson and gold, with the veil of black hair drawn back from her face, was Istar of Babylon, Belshazzar's wife. Beside her, transformed by the new power of his life and love, was the storm-eyed prince, holding Istar's infant in his arms. Nabonidus' eyes looked again

into those of his son, and found there something that now only he understood. A smile stole over the childlike face of the old man. Belshazzar had found a heart-home. Belshazzar was a king in spirit. What mattered it how soon in truth? The vision grew brighter still, till the three figures were aureoled with a divine light. Istar spoke to her husband, held out her arms for the child. Then suddenly there came, from the passage outside the door, a low murmur of voices and a quick cry. The vision crumbled. Nabonidus started up. His ears were pierced by the sound of a shrill scream, and the words spoken by Kudashû: "My lord! My king! Save thys—" Then came a heavy thud as of a body fallen, and Nabu-Nahid leaped to his feet as three men burst into the room.

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Two of them were soldiers in armor. The third, who carried a lighted torch, was in the garb of a priest. It was Ludar, the president of the college.

"How do ye thus enter my presence?" demanded Nabonidus, glaring about him wrathfully.

Ludar shot a sharp glance at him, and the hands of the soldiers tightened on their dripping pikes.

Nabonidus' question was fully answered, and he asked no more; but his manner did not change. Perhaps he drew himself up a little, became a little more royal, a little more angry, a little brighter of eye, a little whiter of face. The soldiers stood mute and motionless, waiting evidently for their next move to be ordered by Ludar, their leader. He, after a moment or two, nodded to them.

"Do what is commanded to be done," he said.

In a breath Nabonidus of Babylon lay on his back on the floor, while the two soldiers worked to bind him about with heavy thongs till he was unable to move so much as a finger alone. Lastly the gag was put upon him; but there was no need of it. During the whole business the old man remained perfectly passive, perfectly still, gazing steadily up into the face of Ludar, who presently refused to meet his glance, though he could not, in that small room, get out of range of the pale, fixed eyes.

When their captive was perfectly secure, the soldiers lifted him in their arms and carried him roughly out of the room, past the bloody body of Kudashû, along the silent passage and out into the night, where, before the door of the college, waited a cart, one of the rude vehicles of the common people, drawn by a water-buffalo. Into this lowliest of all conveyances the king was lifted and laid down. There was a word of command from the soldier that clambered in beside him. The driver gave a long shout, and the cart clattered away from the door of the college in which, with his still burning torch, stood white-robed Ludar, left alone with his triumph.

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As they went along, the king, his gaze turned upward to the sky, could see nothing of what was happening in the streets around him. But that something unusual had occurred was only too apparent, and what that something was, was not difficult to surmise. The city was filled with soldiers, half of them in the uniform of the Babylonish guards, and half of them in the dress of those that had entered the presence of the king. Yet there was very evidently no hostility between them. Men, women, and children were also in the streets, the last making an especial clamor over this unexpected holiday night. Here and there bonfires burned in the heat. In every direction torches flitted through the moonlight. And still to the strained ears of the king came not one sound of combat, no single clash of swords or whistling of stones from the sling. No. Sippar had fallen, had fallen to Elam, without blood, without a suggestion of defence, without one blow for this, Nabu-Nahid's, country, the country over which he had ruled as justly and as gently as he could for seventeen proud years. No. He had been left alone, utterly alone, without a single hand to hold him back when others pushed him ruthlessly forward to face the rainbow gates of the silver sky.

Through the city and out of the gate of Babylon and over the shadowy plain for half a mile or more, the slow cart passed till it came to a halt in the camp of the invader, in front of a great, crimson tent that stood in the midst of a host of smaller ones, and on top of which, from the head of a spear fastened to the central pole, hung suspended the Persian sun-standard. Nabonidus saw this, rising against the shadowy sky; and seeing it, he realized where they were.

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There were two soldiers guarding the door of this tent; and, as the cart halted before it, a short colloquy passed between them and Nabonidus' captors. Then one of the soldiers disappeared inside, to come forth again an instant later with an order. Nabonidus was lifted from the vehicle and carried inside the temporary domicile of the general. He was greeted by a glare of light so bright that, involuntarily, his weak eyes closed before it. When he opened them again to look about, he had been placed on his feet, and found himself facing a tall, heavily armored, black-bearded fellow, with piercing eyes and an air of undeniable dignity, who performed an obeisance due from a nobleman of rank to a sovereign.

"Lord Nabonidus of Babylon, I bid you welcome to my tent in the name of Bel, your god. I am Gobryas, general of the army of Kurush of Elam."

Nabonidus slowly bent his head. "I am your prisoner. Do your will with me," he said, faintly.

"It is my wish, O king, that you sleep here to-night in peace. By rule of war you are my prisoner. Yet know that I and all that is mine to give, save only freedom, are at the king's command."

Again Nabonidus bowed his head; and then, lifting it slowly, he gazed at Gobryas with a question in his eyes.

"I ask of you to speak, lord king!" said the general, with all courtesy in his tone.

Nabonidus drew a quick breath. Then, with an effort, he said: "Sippar—is fallen—to you?"

Gobryas bowed, with regret in his attitude.

"And my servants—Nânâ-Babilû, and Sharrukin, the former governor of the city, where are they?"

"O king, they have suffered the fate of the conquered. They alone, out of all Sippar, were killed in defending their palaces." [Pg 384]

"They alone," whispered the king to himself, wearily. "They alone? Nay, there was one other—one other faithful servant had I in my kingdom. I pray that Bel—re—ceive—" The old man reeled where he stood. Gobryas sprang quickly forward, catching him before he fell. And as he gazed upon the helpless, innocent face of the fallen king, Gobryas was constrained to wonder a little whether the part he had played in this game of unwarlike war were quite worth the suffering it inflicted upon others.

XVI BELTI-SHAR-UZZUR

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Eight days after the fall of Sippar, the army of the Elamite king lay encamped before Babylon. Not so vast an army, after all, this that had come out of lower Chaldea, after a series of astounding victories, to take the Great City from her king. Less than half a mile from where the gigantic height of Nimitti-Bel shut off the northeast horizon, the tents of Cyrus' army lay scattered over the parched plain. The largest of these, over which hung the royal standard, stood in the centre of the first line of the encampment, where it was most prominent to the eye from the city walls, and in the place of greatest danger in case of a sortie from the city.

Inside of Cyrus' tent, on this third day of the inactive siege, sat the royal commander himself, hard at work. The weather, even to a Babylonian born and bred, was nearly unendurable. To one who had been reared in the hills and had ruled over mountain-built Susa, with her fresh northerly winds and cold torrent streams, the temperature of a Chaldean summer was something to be marvelled at. To-day the conqueror half sat, half lay upon the couch in his tent, dictating letters to three scribes, who bent over their bricks in a steaming row in the door of the tent. Both the manner and the voice of the Achæmenian betrayed his intense fatigue. Nevertheless he kept steadily on, formulating various curious plans for the prosecution of his siege.

A short, rather stocky man, this Cyrus, with thick, curling hair, a beard more golden-brown than black, and eyes so piercingly brilliant that it was difficult to determine their shade. His face had been tanned to a leathery brown by years of exposure in various climes; but his hands were smooth, shapely, and well-kept. In dress, there was no hint of either soldier or ruler. His head was bound round with a red fillet embroidered in black and gold. His body was clothed in the lightest and simplest of yellowish cotton tunics, narrowly bordered with red. On his feet he wore sandals, and his ankles and calves were bare. Only by his eyes and by the quick decisiveness of his manner could one have guessed that his station was high. And yet, with these two things to go by, few would have failed to select this man out of a hundred others as being indeed Kurush, the king. [Pg 386]

Besides the king and his three scribes, there was one other person in the royal tent on this blazing afternoon of the twenty-second of the month Duzu. This was a young man, tall and meagre in body, with a peculiarly long head, a face not wholly devoid of beauty, but with an expression lurking about the lips and eyes that one who loved him would not have cared to analyze. Richly dressed was this youth, much belted, chained, and braceleted with silver and gold, his tunic elaborately embroidered, the very thongs of his sandals wrought with lapis-lazuli and crystals. It was Cambyses, eldest son and heir of the great Cyrus, who thus lay in the presence of his father, sighing out his weariness with the heat, with the campaign, with the lack of fighting, with the length of days—with anything and everything that it came into his head to say, and with that everything twisted into a complaint.

Cyrus, long accustomed to this monotone as an accompaniment to his afternoons of labor, listened to it abstractedly as he continued his letters. The train of thought that could not be disturbed by words, however, was presently broken by a shadow passing the door-way of the tent; and he suddenly looked up, staring at the second scribe, trying to return to his sentence, but able to think of nothing but the last imprecation uttered by his son. [Pg 387]

"In the name of Ahura the blessed, Cambyses, get you from my presence till these labors are at an end! Follow Bardiya into the camp, go where you will, but leave me to the letters that must be despatched to-night if there be no word from Gobryas this afternoon."

"May he soon come!" muttered the first scribe; and the second and third, hearing, sighed in unison and wiped the sweat from their dripping brows.

Cambyses had risen and was doubtfully contemplating the prospect of the camp. Cyrus had come back to the subject of his epistle, and the scribe sat with his cuneiform iron poised in the air,

when the scene was broken up. A horse, carrying a rider who clung to its bare back like a monkey, one hand twisted in the mane for guidance, came dashing up over the plain from the northwest and stopped at the tent door. The rider leaped to the ground, bending his head slightly before the king, and shouting, in a clear, fresh voice:

"News, my father! News at last! Gobryas with his army is three miles away. He will reach us by nightfall!"

Cyrus sprang to his feet. "How know you this, Bardiya?"

"I have seen them all, spoken with the general, and return to thee as his messenger."

Cyrus quickly waved his hand to the scribes. "Get you to your tents. Do not return to me till I shall command."

He waited while the three men picked up their stools in sober joy, and, saluting the royal master with a single accord, departed in an orderly file. When they were out of hearing, and Cyrus and his two sons were quite alone, the king let fall the crimson flap over the tent door, and then turned to Bardiya with his face very eager. "The king, Bar—"

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"Gobryas brings with him Nabu-Nahid, the king of Babylon, a prisoner, to deliver him up to you."

Cyrus nodded, with less satisfaction than the boy had expected, and then thoughtfully bent his head. There was a short silence, which neither of the sons dared break. They saw an expression of trouble creep into their father's face. They saw him frown, and they heard him sigh. Then suddenly he crossed to a small coffer in the tent, and drew from it a long, white streamer.

"Bardiya, fasten this to the head of the spear on top of the tent. Put it there thyself, and at once."

The boy, in extreme surprise, received the pennant from his father's hand and went outside with it. Fifteen minutes later it was floating in the hot afternoon wind from the top of the royal tent; and ten minutes after that a white-robed acolyte had left the summit of Nimitti-Bel and was speeding through the fields on his way to a certain house in the centre of the city.

The afternoon passed. It came to be the hour of day's death, and in that hour the final junction of the two invading armies was to be effected. Seven months before, in the hills of Elam, they had separated, Gobryas marching to the north, Cyrus to the south. And now, each of them having fulfilled to the letter his plan of campaign, there remained only one thing more to do, the taking of that city which, six years ago, Cyrus had found impregnable to arms, and which he was now to assault in a less honorable and surer way.

The lamps in the royal tent were already swinging from their chains in a glow of fire, and the full moon was rising from the east over the city, though the sky was still too white for stars, when Cyrus, with Cambyses on his right hand and Bardiya on his left, stood in the door-way of his tent, waiting. Over the plain, at no great distance, could be seen a slow-moving line of horses and men. In front of this line, advancing at full gallop, came a single chariot, drawn by three white horses harnessed abreast, and carrying three men—the driver and two others. This vehicle hurried along straight in the direction of the royal tent, until presently Cyrus stepped eagerly forward, while his sons cried in one voice, "Gobryas!"

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The chariot came to a halt, and from it leaped a tall, bearded fellow, whom Cyrus seized in his arms and clasped delightedly. "Welcome, lord of Sippar. Welcome, O conqueror!" he cried, in the Aramaic language, generally used in his camp, and understood by Babylonian, Jew, and Elamite alike.

Having been embraced, Gobryas saw fit to bend the knee before his master, saying: "I bring the king my lord his royal prisoner. He is full of years and weary with the length of day. Let him, I pray, be removed to some tent that befits his rank, where refreshment may be given him."

Three pairs of eyes looked quickly up to the chariot, but Nabonidus' back was turned to them. He stood there alone, his chained arms at his sides, looking off upon the walls of Babylon. His face was invisible; but Cyrus, seeing it, would not have known the expression. As it was, when the conqueror stepped up to the chariot and spoke a word of courteous greeting, the old man turned to him a dull and gentle countenance.

"O king, Nabu-Nahid of the Great City, let thy body find rest and refreshment here in my frail dwelling-place! In the name of the blessed Ahura-Mazda, I, Kurush, bid thee welcome. Descend from the hot chariot and enter my tent."

Nabonidus acknowledged the courtesy with old-accustomed graciousness. In alighting from the vehicle he stumbled a little in his great exhaustion. Instantly Bardiya and Gobryas started to his side, and, each taking an arm, assisted the fallen king gently inside the tent, prepared for him the couch on which Cambyses had spent the afternoon, and made him comfortable upon it while Cyrus called to a slave to bring food and wine to all.

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The five of them partook together of the evening meal, while conversation ran upon general topics. Nabonidus did not speak; nor, though the others did not guess it, did he listen to what was said. Cyrus and his general might have discussed their most secret plans without risk of being overheard or understood, for Nabonidus' heart was beyond them, in Babylon, and his thoughts were of his world, not of theirs.

After the meal was over, however, Gobryas leaned across to the king and whispered, just audibly: "I must go forth now, for a time, to oversee the encampment that you have commanded. While I am gone, were it not well that Nabonidus be put in a tent of his own, under guard, that when I return we may talk freely of many things?"

"Nabu-Nahid—" Cyrus hesitated a little in his reply. "Nabu-Nahid will, I think, not sleep in this camp to-night. He is to be delivered into other hands, to which, many weeks ago, I promised to intrust him."

"Whose are they?" demanded Gobryas, roughly, without any of the respect due to his lord.

Cyrus failed to resent the breach. His expression betokened regret as he opened his lips to reply. But before a word left his mouth two figures appeared suddenly in the door-way—two white-robed figures, only one of whom wore the goat-skin on his shoulder. Before Cyrus could turn to them, the prisoner on the couch sprang suddenly to his feet, and a cry rang out into the night:

"Amraphel—thou dog!"

Then silence ensued. Gobryas, whose back had turned to the door, moved slowly round. Catching sight of the new-comers, he suddenly realized what Cyrus had meant: suddenly knew why Nabonidus would not sleep that night safely guarded in the camp. The high-priest of Babylon, and the leader of the Jews, in response to a prearranged signal, had come to claim their own—part of their payment for the betrayal of the city.

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As he looked and understood yet more, Gobryas' face darkened with disgust. He could imagine well enough what was to follow, and his spirit revolted against taking any part in it.

"Let my lord give me permission to retire!" he demanded gruffly of Cyrus.

The king nodded to him, and the general forthwith, with a curl of the lip and a flash of disdain at the Babylonians, brushed his way by them and hurriedly left the tent. His departure removed the single disinterested element in the scene—and those that remained to enact it drew mental breath. For a moment or two no one moved. Priest and Jew stood facing the conqueror, the three of them eying one another in full understanding of this consummation of their plot. The conqueror's sons, more than half cognizant of the whole significance of the affair, shifted their glances from one figure to another with a vague sense of foreboding. Lastly, Nabonidus, the central figure in the scene, stiff and faint in his unutterable desertion, hair and face far whiter than his stained garments, confronted, with an air of supreme accusation, the two betrayers of his people. The silence was long, and nearly unendurable. Amraphel would not speak; Cyrus could not; the young men did not dare. It remained for Belti-shar-uzzur, evading that burning glance of Nabu-Nahid's, to address himself to the conqueror:

"We have seen the signal, Kurush, and have answered it. We are come to receive our own."

For the shadow of an instant Cyrus dropped his eyes. He said, anxiously: "Leave the prisoner here. I swear to his safety. He shall come to no harm!"

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Amraphel stepped forward with menace in his eyes. "The promise! Remember the promise! Remember, or we fail you. Babylon to thee—Nabu-Nahid to us!"

At these words two cries rang out through the tent. The one was from Nabu-Nahid, the other from Cyrus' youngest son. The boy stepped forward quickly, his feeling plainly written in his young face. "My father!" was all he said; but before the words, and the unutterable things they told, the head of the great warrior fell and his heart smote him.

"Give us our tribute, Kurush!" sneered the Jew, scorning the scene.

"Take what was promised you," answered the conqueror, slowly.

Belti-shar-uzzur stepped forward exultantly and would have put out his hand to touch Nabonidus' arm, when the old man quickly turned from him and cast himself at Cyrus' feet.

"Thou wearest, there at thy waist, a knife, O conqueror! Let it by thy hand rest in my heart!" he cried out. "Send me not forth, great king, in the power of these two, or I die terribly! I die alone, in the night, with none to close my eyes!"

Cyrus turned his head away. "Take the prisoner from my sight, ye dogs, or I will hold ye both here also! Take him from me!"

At this Daniel, starting forward, threw himself on the kneeling king, caught him about the meagre body, swung him up to shoulder, and would have started out of the tent when Amraphel stopped him.

"The gag," he muttered, sharply.

Bardiya started forward, his hand on his sword; but his father, catching him by the girdle, held him in a grasp of iron till the operation was over and the piece of wood lay in Nabu-Nahid's mouth, fastened there with a white bandage. His hands and feet were also bound with leathern thongs, and after this the body, now as helpless as a log, was borne out into the night in the arms of the Jew. Then Cyrus and his sons were left alone, nor, during the remainder of that unhappy night, did they speak one to another.

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In the mean time Daniel had carried the king to where, some yards from the entrance of the royal tent, there stood a closed litter, such as was used by women of rank. Beside it, as it rested on the ground, were its four bearers, stalwart men, muffled from head to foot in white—slaves of the house of Amraphel. None of these mute, dark-faced creatures stirred as their master returned to them with his companion and his companion's burden. Only, as they came close, the foremost fellow silently threw back the curtain from one side of the basket-like couch. Daniel stooped and laid the body of the king on his back on the cushions inside. The king closed his eyes. The curtain was lowered and Amraphel gave the signal. The four slaves seized the poles and, softly singing their working-chorus, raised their burden waist-high and began their walk back to the gate of Sand.

It was a twenty-minute walk, and was accomplished without adventure. When they came to a halt outside the gate, Nabonidus, anxiously listening, could hear nothing but a suggestion of whispering between Amraphel and some one whom he believed to be the captain of the gate. Presently their way was resumed, and the company passed into the city. A little distance inside, the litter stopped again and was set down on the ground. The curtains were thrown back, Daniel bent again over the king, took him about the body, and, lifting him, laid him in one of two chariots that stood waiting. In his single fleeting glance Nabonidus recognized both of these as belonging to Amraphel's house. The king lay in the one that Daniel entered. From the other, where Amraphel stood, came presently the long, peculiar cry for the starting of the horses. Daniel's driver echoed it. The animals sprang forward, and the long drive through the city began.

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In spite of the jolting misery of that ride, Nabonidus preferred it to the litter. Air came freely to his lips, and now he could see a little of what they passed. The moon was well up in the unclouded sky, lighting the fields and streets of the Great City for the last passage of her last native king. Nabonidus' heart was full, but he did not weep. The end to which he was going was unknown. Yet this, for him, was, as he knew well, the last sight of his beloved city. Still, even as he went, the moonlight fell athwart the sapphire charm that hung upon his neck, and sent forth a thin gleam of the blue light of hope—a hope that could not be brought to fulfilment by anything short of a miracle.

The horses on both the chariots were swift, and it took scarcely a half-hour to reach the second gate of Sand in Imgur-Bel. Through this they passed without parley, and the journey across the inner city was begun. They had entered Babylon at the extreme west, a little to the north of the canal of the New Year, which, as they drove, could be seen in the distance, shining clear as silver frost in the moonlight, reflecting in its placid surface the shadowy black buildings near it on either side. Ribâta's house was too far distant to be seen; and the tenement of Ut rose tall and gaunt a long way to the south. Ten minutes later the hurrying vehicles clattered into the Â-Ibur-Sabû. They continued along the famous way for little more than a quarter of a mile, and then turned to the east again, till, at something near eleven o'clock, they came to a halt beside a small, neglected building on the bank of the river Euphrates: mighty Euphrates whose Chaldaic waves were of tears to-night. Here, evidently, was their destination. Nabonidus, aching in every joint, groaning wretchedly in his heart, was lifted again in Daniel's arms. He had one glance at the river and the group of royal buildings clustered thereon but a little distance away. For one instant the three famous palaces and the mound of the hanging gardens met his eyes. Then they were lost to him, for the world swam and grew black, and he fainted.

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Two minutes later, when he returned into a dim consciousness, he was in a place that he soon came to recognize. It was the temporary abode of his strange gods. The interior, lighted by two torches, that burned blue and ghostlike on the bare brick walls, was utterly forlorn. The walls, floors, and ceiling were of crumbling gray brick, unrelieved by a single color or attempt at ornament; and the usually open door-way was now closed by a black curtain. So much he saw in the first moment of arrival. In the next he realized that the gag had been taken from his mouth and that his arms were being unbound. In the third the voice of Amraphel was heard, bidding him rise. Obediently he made the attempt, got, with much effort, to his feet, reeled blindly, and was saved from falling again by Daniel. Amraphel's lip curled. Nevertheless he helped the old man to sit down with his back to the wall. Then, when Nabonidus had blinked a little and grown steadier as to his head, the high-priest stood over him and spoke:

"Thou, O weak one, hast been king of the Great City. King of her shalt thou be nevermore. Here thou art, alone, unheard, unseen, in my power and the power of the captive Jew. Death hangs over thy head; yet by one means thou mayst save thyself. Wilt thou hear?"

Nabonidus, looking at him steadily, nodded.

Amraphel continued: "No man, Nabonidus, either fears or loves thee. Thy power over the people of the Great City does not by one-twentieth equal mine. But at thy passing there are two—two whom I hate—and, I say it, fear—that will struggle for the crown thou hast borne. One of these thou hast seen to-night—the Achæmenian. The other is the child of thy flesh, not of thy spirit—Belshazzar the prince. Nabu-Nahid, if thou to-night wilt swear, on penalty of the curse of all the gods, to remove thy son and thy son's wives, and thyself and thy wives, and all thy household, from the royal palace, and wilt swear that thou and he will go forth in peace out of the Great City, to return no more to it forever, if thou wilt do this—"

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"Thou fool!"

Amraphel faced round. "What sayest thou, Jew?"

"Thou fool! Wilt thou put faith in the word of a man in the death fear? Wilt thou play me false? There was to be no choice here to-night. Mine eyes were to behold the blood of the enemy of my race. He shall find no mercy—or, if he finds it, then thou shalt not!"

Amraphel grew white with anger; but, before he spoke again, Nabonidus had struggled to his feet and stood supporting himself against the wall, gazing with fiery eyes at his enemy.

"I also say it:—thou fool!" he said. "Think you, indeed, that because I am old and feeble, and in the power of traitors, I would sell the birthright of my son? Thou fool!"

At these words Daniel turned to the old man and looked thoughtfully at him. But Amraphel, with a sneer, advanced a step or two, and said, in a soft and menacing voice: "The hour is come, Nabu-Nahid. Prepare thyself!"

"O Bel! Receive my spirit into the silver sky!"

Slowly Daniel drew his knife, but Amraphel was before him. Nabonidus saw the weapon of his enemy flash in the torch-light. The gleam of it passed over his deathly face. Just at the moment of the blow, a faint cry left his lips. Then a long spurt of heart's blood shot from the body. There was a sickening gasp—a fall—and the flesh only was there with the murderers. Nabu-Nahid had gone. Belshazzar was king in Babylon.

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The Jew had gone rather sick, and Amraphel himself was white to the lips. "Let us go forth," he muttered, unsteadily.

"Fool!" said Daniel, for the second time. "Wilt thou leave here the body of the king, that all Babylon may look on it at dawn? Shall thy charioteer and mine say who it was that brought Nabonidus here? Thou hast struck the blow. Hast thou lost strength to finish the work?"

Amraphel caught at his nerves and said: "What is there to be done?"

Daniel's lip curled, but he did not reply in words. Passing into a far corner of the temple, he took up two fallen bricks that lay there and brought them over to the body. At the sight Amraphel came to his senses.

"I will make fast this one to his feet if thou takest the hands," he said, quietly.

Accordingly Daniel drew from his girdle two more leathern thongs, and with them the weights were bound upon the body. Then the two stood back and looked at their work. Amraphel was satisfied. Not so the Jew. One more brick he fetched from the little heap in the corner and fastened it on Nabonidus' neck, never noticing that in the operation he loosened and dislodged something that had been around the throat of the king. The last task finished, he stood back once more, carefully examining the bloody corpse.

"Take out thy dagger," he said, finally, to his companion.

Amraphel shrank back. "I cannot!" he whispered.

Beltishazzar bent over and drew it from the wound. Blood followed it in a thick stream. The Jew wiped the weapon off on the skirt of Nabonidus' robe and silently handed it to his companion. "Now—take thou the feet," he commanded, himself lifting the shoulders of the light body.

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Revolting as it all was, Amraphel could not but obey the word of the Jew. Together they bore the body out of the temple, into the still moonlight, down to the edge of the quietly flowing river. For an instant they held it over the brink. Then, at a whisper from the Jew, they let go together. There was a splash, an eddy in the water, a little red stain on the clear stream, and then only a widening circle of ripples remained to mark the resting-place of Babylon's last king.

Late on the afternoon of the next day, Belitsum, the low-born second wife of Nabonidus, sat, as usual, in the court-yard of her part of the seraglio, in her usual canopied idleness. Morning prayers and exorcisms had been said; the daily omens looked to; all the endless details of superstition finished; and now the queen of Babylon was free to dream away the rest of the day in comparative quiet. Beside her lay a piece of unfinished embroidery, badly done; for her plebeian fingers had never taken kindly to this work of the gentle-born. Two eunuchs waved over her huge feather fans, of which the extreme size denoted her rank. Beside her sat a pretty slave with a lute in her hand, though Belitsum was paying no attention to the sweet monotony of the tune she played. The queen was lost in one of those vacant reveries in which long years of idleness and neglect had taught her to remain for hours.

Suddenly there came an interruption upon this quiet scene. A eunuch of the outer palace hurriedly entered the court, and, prostrating himself profoundly before Belitsum, asked permission to speak.

The queen was a moment or two coming out of her dreams, but she presently recovered enough to find her curiosity, and to say with some eagerness: "Speak, slave! Deliver thy message. Is it from the king?"

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"May it be pleasing to the queen my lady! No word hath come from Nabu-Nahid. It is a soothsayer that comes in royal state, beseeching the ears of the queen to incline to him."

"A soothsayer?" Belitsum relapsed into tranquillity. "Let him be taken into the shrine. But also cause him to know that for this day the gods have been propitiated."

As the eunuch departed, Belitsum, who had long since lost claim to youth and the slenderness thereof, rose with an effort to her feet. "Kudûa," she said to the slave, who had also scrambled up, "wait thou my return. I am going to the shrine."

Kudûa fell back willingly enough, while the queen, followed by her fan-bearers, waddled slowly across the court-yard towards the specially consecrated room in which any member of the royal harem might hold conference with men of the outer world. In spite of her slow pace, the queen reached the dimly lighted apartment in advance of the soothsayer; and she occupied her time till his arrival in offering up a quick prayer to Nindar, her especial deity. The Amanû had hardly been reached when two figures appeared in the door-way, one the attendant eunuch, the other a magnificently robed and coroneted man, in whom one accustomed to his usual slovenly appearance would have had great difficulty in recognizing Beltishazzar the Jew.

Belitsum, entirely ignorant of his race and station, judging him only by his dress and bearing, came forward with hasty respect, leaving her fan-bearers on either side of the small altar. At the same time Daniel, accustomed of old to the rigorous etiquette of the court, made a proper and graceful obeisance.

"Art thou indeed but a soothsayer?" inquired Belitsum, admiringly.

"No soothsayer I, lady queen of Babylon, but a prophet and a dreamer of dreams. And it is by reason of a dream sent me by the Lord of my race that I come to you, seeking audience. Open my lips, O queen, that I may tell this dream!"

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"Wilt thou have gold? Wilt thou have gems and silver? How shall I open thy lips?"

"Bid me only to speak. Grant me the favor. Let me tell the dream, and restrain thy tears till its truth be known."

At these last words Belitsum nervously clasped and unclasped her hands. "Speak!" she said, quickly. "Tell thy dream! Speak!"

"In the evening of yesterday I lay down and slept. And in my sleep the Lord appeared to me in a vision, saying: 'Go thou down to the temple of strange gods by the side of the river, and there shalt thou find him who was king in Babylon.' And thereat, in my dream, I arose and went down through the city to the river-bank and the deserted temple thereon. And there I beheld Nabu-Nahid, the king, in mortal combat with two men that sought to kill him. And in my sleep I was withheld from giving him aid. I saw him fall by the blow from a golden dagger, and when he was dead the assassins, whose faces remained black to me, lifted him in their arms and cast him into the river, and he sank from my sight. Then said the Lord unto me again: 'Having beheld this thing, hasten to her who was the wife of him that is dead and relate it to her.' And behold, when I awoke I obeyed the word of the Lord; and, obeying, I now go forth from thy presence." Whereupon Daniel, with a delightfully dramatic effect, turned short on his heel, leaving the shrine, and in three minutes was outside the palace gates.

Through his recital Belitsum and her eunuchs had remained open-mouthed, rooted where they stood. It was not till the Jew had actually disappeared from her sight that the queen's amazement was overcome by her dismay, and, with a long-drawn, preliminary howl, she fell flat upon the floor in an agony of despair. Nabonidus, her husband, was dead. Never for one instant did her devout soul doubt the word of the prophet. Nabonidus was dead, and she was a widow. The shrine echoed to the sounds of shrieks, of groans, of wailing, finally of hysterical laughter. Now and then an attendant, drawn thither by the sounds of woe, appeared in the door-way, looked at her, at the bewildered eunuchs behind her, and scurried away again in empty-headed wonder. Finally one, wiser than the rest, went to the room where Belshazzar sat in council, and informed him that his step-mother was dying in the harem shrine. The prince was forced to believe the frightened and excited manner of the slave, and, hastily excusing himself to his lords, he strode through the palace to the shrine. In the door-way he halted. Belitsum was kneeling on the floor, beating her breast and wailing out prayers for the dead. She did not even notice the appearance of the prince.

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"Belitsum—lady—what is thy grief?" he asked, gently.

No response. Ejaculations and redoubled wails.

Then Belshazzar, perceiving that she was bordering on frenzy, went forward and took her by the shoulders. "Art thou stricken with a sickness?" he demanded, loudly.

"Thy father—Nabu-Nahid—the king!" was all the answer he could get.

Belshazzar grew a shade paler. "My father!" He looked about him, and caught the eye of one of the eunuchs in the corner. This man he addressed. "What is the cause of this weeping? Knowest thou wherefore she cries?"

The man nodded solemnly.

"Speak, then!"

Forthwith the slave began an intelligent recital of the occurrences of the last half-hour, including

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a repetition of the dream in Daniel's own words. Belitsum quieted enough during this speech to listen again to the dream; but, after it was finished, the look on Belshazzar's face somehow withheld her from recommencing her lamentations.

"Who was this man? Didst thou know him?" demanded the prince of the slave.

"O prince, live forever! He was a strange prophet. Never before have mine eyes beheld him."

Belshazzar bit his lip. His face was very grave. After a short pause he took Belitsum by the arm and lifted her up. Then, turning again to the eunuch, he said, quietly:

"Go thou and command my chariot to be brought, and let the driver be alone in it."

Then, having almost tenderly returned Belitsum to the harem, and bidding her restrain her weeping till his return, Belshazzar went forth to dismiss his council for the morning, retaining Ribâta alone out of all the councillors. Fifteen minutes later he and Bit-Shumukin together mounted the chariot and set forth for the little temple of strange gods on the bank of the Euphrates. During the drive Belshazzar related to Ribâta the substance of what he knew; and, like himself, Ribâta's first question was as to the identity of the prophet.

"There is one whom it might be," suggested the nobleman, when Belshazzar had confessed himself at fault. "It may, perhaps, be Daniel the Jew."

"So at first I thought. Yet when has any man ever beheld Daniel in such raiment as this prophet wore? The Jew is poor."

Ribâta demurred a little, yet could not but admit that Belshazzar had all the evidence on his side. Then, as they neared the temple, silence fell between them.

The little building stood before them utterly deserted. Not a human being was in sight. It was a lonely spot—too far south of the bridge and too far north of the ferry to be frequented by any one. The prince dismounted from the chariot first, but in the curtained door-way of the temple he paused.

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"Ribâta," said he, softly, "I am afraid."

Bit-Shumukin's reply was to lay a brother's hand on his shoulder. Then Belshazzar lifted back the curtain and entered the room. There came a great cry from his lips, and the hideous sight was once more veiled in gloom.

"There is blood, Ribâta! It is blood!" whispered the prince, hoarsely.

"I saw it, Belshazzar. Yet it may be the blood of an animal, or of some other man. I cannot think that thy father was yester-night in Babylon. Come, let us look, my prince. Within we may find some trace—some evidence of what has happened."

The prince shrank. "Wilt thou do it, Ribâta?" he asked.

Accordingly, while Belshazzar held aside the curtain that some light might enter by the door-way, Ribâta, sick at heart, hunted over the blood-splashed floor for some clew to the identity of what it was that had died here. Belshazzar presently turned his back and stood staring into the street, refusing to look, yet listening with every sense for a dreaded exclamation from his friend. It came. As Bit-Shumukin bent over the corner where Nabonidus had fallen, he found something that wrung from him a low cry.

Belshazzar turned deathly white. "What is it?" he said, quietly.

Ribâta came to him with something in his hand. It was a small, shining, blue stone, that showed itself in the sunshine to be an Egyptian-cut sapphire of great value, attached to a wire of twisted gold.

Belshazzar took it dully from his hand. "My father wore it always on his neck. Let us return to the palace," he said.

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"But the body—it may surely be found!"

"The river hath it. Let her keep her own."

And so the two remounted the vehicle and started on their way back through the city of which Belshazzar was king.

XVII THE WOMAN'S WOE

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On that fateful morning Belshazzar was away from the palace less than one hour; yet when he re-entered it he was aged ten years at heart, and one, at least, in appearance. He neither saw nor heard any one as he hurried through the great court-yard to his own room, whither Ribâta accompanied him and remained with him till late afternoon, while they two took council together. Belshazzar was unnaturally calm. Through all their talk neither he nor Ribâta once hinted that

either knew or cared to know the identity of the murderers. For, whatever they suspected, whatever was all but a certainty, both of them were too painfully aware of Babylon's present situation not to know that any accusation they might make of those whose power was now supreme, would do infinitely more harm than good: would merely precipitate that frightful climax that both of them dreaded and neither spoke of. Therefore, after a careful debate, it was decided to keep the murder of Nabonidus a profound secret until such time as the disclosure might be safely made.

"I charge thee as my brother, Ribâta," were Belshazzar's parting words to his friend that day, "that thou let no man or woman, of whatever station, know from thy lips who is king of Babylon. And save for Istar, who is as myself, none shall know it from my lips. But also, as I live and reign, there shall come a day, not too distant, when justice shall be done—when this foul crime shall be avenged, as never crime before, on them that have accomplished it."

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Ribâta gave his promise in all devotion, and, embracing his king, bade him farewell and set off to his own abode, his mind unstrung by the fearful discovery of the morning.

Long hours before, Belshazzar had sent a message of reassurance to Belitsum; and now, with a weary sigh of relief, he turned his steps towards the distant apartments of his wife and child. With Istar, as he knew, was peace and sympathy. Never yet had she failed to understand him, and to offer him in his trials the comfort that he needed. His mind, like his heart, was absolutely hers. Arrived at the threshold of the room where, at this hour, she was always to be found, he stopped, his hand upon the curtain. Some one within had been singing. Now, noiseless as was his approach, the voice was silent. The curtain was pushed aside. Istar stood before him with a smile in her eyes.

"I felt thy presence, lord," she said, in such a tone that his face kindled with love-light. "Thou—Belshazzar! Art thou ill?"

"Yea, at heart," he answered. "Not in body. Be not afraid. Let me come in to thee, that I may tell thee Babylon's new woe."

Istar took him gently by the hand and led him into the apartment. Inside stood Baba, holding the baby to her breast. It was she whose voice Belshazzar had heard. Belshazzar greeted the little slave, and then Istar, knowing how he wished to be alone with her, whispered a word to Baba, who a moment later went quietly away.

When they were alone Belshazzar sank back on the divan in the corner, and Istar, laying her baby upon the bed, seated herself at her lord's feet, laid her hands in his, and anxiously scanned his care-worn face.

"Kurush hath stormed the walls, Belshazzar? The city is taken?" she asked.

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"Nay, my beloved. My father hath been murdered in the city—in the temple of the strange gods, by the river-bank."

"Thy father!" Istar gasped with horror. "Thy father! Oh, my lord—my lord—save thyself! If they should do this with—" Istar's head sank forward. She brought both Belshazzar's hands to her lips and held them there in an agony of love and terror. So they remained for a long time, sorrowing together silently: Istar for her lord, Belshazzar for the city. But Istar's presence brought comfort to the heart of the king, and her touch filled him with that high sense of protectiveness that generates the truest courage. In this woman life had given him enough. He had neither desire nor need for further blessings. His father had not been to him all that a stronger man might have been. It was the horror of that father's lonely death that now so completely overwhelmed him. But Istar, feminine, weak even, as she had come to be, brought him his full meed of consolation. The two of them wore the night away in council for Babylon; for Istar's fears for her king had now become abnormal. Belshazzar listened in surprise to her desperate prayers that he surround himself with every protection, that he beware against venturing out at night, that he wear armor under his tunic, and that he carry weapons of defence always around with him.

"They that sought thy father's life seek also thine," she insisted, till in the end Belshazzar left her with the promise that he would care for himself as he would have cared for her.

If this promise were not to the letter kept, it was hardly to be laid at Belshazzar's door as a fault. For at such a time as this, when the city was in such peril, an example of cowardly fear from its ruler would have resulted badly. After the death of Nânâ-Babilû at Sippar, and in the face of the continued absence of Nabonidus, Belshazzar had taken on himself the duties of absolute monarch—lord of the people and general of the army. And certainly it never could be charged to him that he neglected these duties. Early and late, sometimes from dawn until dawn again, he worked on those endless details of civil and military life that he alone could attend to. The city was in a state of siege. All the gates in Nimitti-Bel were closed, and those in Imgur-Bel doubly guarded. Also, in consideration of the fact that the food supplies coming from the country were cut off, the great fields between the outer and inner walls were under cultivation. A census was taken of every soul in the city, and preparations made for the regular daily grain allotments to come now from the granaries, and later from the new crops when they should be ready for harvest. For, by careful management, no one in Babylon need ever suffer from hunger, no matter how long a siege should last. This Cyrus had learned once before, six years ago; and the question now in the mind of every man was: Could he be made to cover it again?

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Certainly the siege was conducted on an extraordinary plan. For ten days the besieging army had lain in camp before the walls of the city, yet not an arrow had as yet been shot on either side, not a javelin hurled nor a stone slung. The handful of soldiers inside the walls were hardly more than enough to man the watch-towers and guard the gates; and they were under orders from Belshazzar to await developments passively. Meantime they were kept in excellent form. Every day Belshazzar reviewed them in the great field between the walls, and daily he examined a certain number of men from his own regiment of Guti as to their intelligence and ability. Also, late in the afternoon, it had become his custom to drive on top of Nimitti-Bel in his chariot, showing himself to the enemy and to the city also. There was little danger in this drive, since the range from Cyrus' camp was too long for any known weapon, and the height of the wall was an excellent safeguard against shots from nearer at hand. At this time quite an extensive stable was maintained on the giant wall. Chariots had been wheeled up the inclined plane that led to the top of it, and orders were carried from gate to gate on horseback along the top. Belshazzar's wild drives on that dizzy height became one of the favorite sights of the citizens; and it grew to be the fashion for numbers of people of all classes to drive out to Nimitti-Bel in the afternoon, to witness the spectacle of the storm-prince in his golden chariot lashing his four white horses madly along that smooth way, two hundred and fifty feet above the ground.

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On the afternoon of the twelfth day of the siege, one of the last days in the month of Duzu, Charmides walked out beyond Imgur-Bel to see this much-talked-of sight. At this time the Greek presented rather a different appearance from that of six months ago. His resignation from the temple of Sin had proved disastrous; and there were now times when the meanest of food was not to be found in the house of Beltani. Charmides had no work to do, would not beg, hated the thought of the temple, grew gaunt and big-eyed, went unkempt as to dress, and mourned over Ramûa, who in turn wept over him, both of them, and Beltani, too, concealing their state from Baba with the utmost care. To-day, after a troubled hour at home, where Ramûa's efforts at cheerfulness were like blows to him, the Greek went out, in the face of a prostrating heat, to seek by rapid walking an escape from the thoughts that pursued him, and to evade the admission to himself of the inevitable end: that he must go back to the profession of lies and of deceit; of treachery, of crimes, of death. He made his way quickly across the city and out beyond the first wall to a spot where green, well-watered fields stretched before his eyes, putting him suddenly back into his youth. He halted in his walk at a distance of thirty yards from the great wall, just behind a group of people come evidently for the same purpose as his—that of watching Belshazzar's drive. Rather absent-mindedly the Greek noticed the man immediately in front of him, who had been in a measure connected with his old life of the temple; and he watched the movements of that lean, ill-kempt figure with the same keen sub-consciousness that one sometimes exercises when the thoughts are very intent on something else. It was in this way that he noted the sling in the right hand of the Jew.

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There was not long to wait for the coming of Belshazzar. At a little murmur from the men in front, Charmides turned his head and saw, far down the wall, a black speck that gradually increased in size, and finally resolved itself into four flying horses, harness and crests flashing in the light of approaching sunset, that raced neck and neck under the long, black lash wielded by him who stood alone in the rattling vehicle—a figure the poise of which was beyond question royal. Charmides looked on it with undisguised admiration—the superb head with its golden coronet, the broad shoulders, to which was fastened a fluttering, crimson cloak, and the hands flashing with jewels the least of which would have kept the Greek's stricken household well fed for months.

Absorbed as were Charmides' eyes in the sight of the approaching figure, he nevertheless felt his gaze suddenly withdrawn to the man in front of him, who was now busily fumbling with the weapon in his right hand. Suddenly a stone had been fitted into the sling and aim taken, and at the same time Charmides' slow thoughts resolved themselves. Leaning forward, he twitched the sleeve on the Jew's right arm at the moment in which the stone flew forth, wide of its mark, while the chariot passed safely by. Belshazzar, with a Hebrew exclamation, wheeled sharply about. Charmides faced him in silence. A look only passed between them, but it was enough. In that little time they knew each other. Charmides had made an enemy, and the all-powerful Jew felt a twinge of fear.

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An hour after this incident Charmides and the king met, face to face, in the middle of the Â-Ibur-Sabû. Belshazzar was in his ordinary chariot, slowly returning from the walls. Charmides was on foot, going his weary way back to the tenement of Ut. It occurred to the Greek to speak to the lord of the city on the subject of his personal safety. He therefore stopped in the road, directly in front of the royal horses. With a sharp exclamation Belshazzar drew up his reins. Catching sight of the Greek's face, however, and recognizing it, he paused to listen when Charmides spoke.

"Lord prince of the Great City—live forever!" he began, formally. "There was to-day an attempt upon the most royal life of the prince my lord."

Belshazzar stared a little. "How, Greek?"

"As the royal chariot drove along the top of Nimitti-Bel, a man, one of the subjects of my lord, made endeavor to fell him by a shot from a sling. I, pulling his sleeve at the moment, caused the stone to fly wide of the mark. When next my lord drives it may be that I shall not be at hand."

Belshazzar looked quizzically into the face of him who spoke these laconic words. But he found no guile in the emaciated face. Instead, there was something there that roused his interest. "Mount beside me, Greek. I have not forgotten thee. Thou shalt return with me to the palace."

Charmides refused. He had no desire for a cross-examination on the subject that he had detailed as fully as he intended to the prince. All efforts on Belshazzar's part to induce him to come were in vain. Therefore, seeing that Charmides would have his way, Belshazzar did what he could for the very apparent signs of pecuniary distress in the youth's appearance. Detaching from his neck a golden chain wrought with well-cut gems, he silently held it out to the Greek.

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Charmides was much displeased. It was the first time that he had ever needed a gift, and therefore the thought of taking this one shamed him. "My words, O prince, were not a suit for gifts."

"Thy wife," suggested Belshazzar, inconsequently.

A flicker passed through the Greek's eyes, but he did not waver. "My lord, I shall probably re-enter the priesthood."

"I think thee no such enemy to me. Come into my regiment of Gutium."

"Nay. I cannot fight. I will have no blood on my hands. I follow music alone; and music forbids murder."

Belshazzar laughed slightly at the fellow's incomprehensible attitude. "Go back, then, to temple service. I will trust thee there," he said, good-naturedly. "And now, the name of him that would have had my life?"

Charmides opened his lips to speak, and then closed them again. "Ask me not. Only beware and guard thyself."

The king bent his brows. "Greek, hast thou lied to me?"

"No, lord prince."

Belshazzar shrugged. "Out of my way, then!" he cried. And Charmides stepped quickly out of the road while the king brought his whip over the haunches of his steeds and started forward, tossing, as he went, the chain of gold at the feet of the Greek. Nor was he ungenerous enough to cast a single backward glance to see whether or no the hungry fellow picked it up.

So Belshazzar proceeded on his way back to the palace, musing rather on the incident of his little talk with Charmides than upon its subject—the attempt on his life. More than this one time, and in more dangerous ways than a sling-shot at a hundred yards, he had been threatened with death. Those very drives round the walls carried with them the possibility of a far more frightful end. But Belshazzar's was an adventurous nature. And danger was his life, a life that the city's state of quiescence had once led him to seek by other than reputable paths.

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On his arrival at the palace he went immediately to Istar's rooms, determined to tell her nothing of the event of the afternoon, for her fears for his personal safety would be thereby enormously increased. But when he came to her he found another subject ready to occupy all his thoughts. Istar was not watching for him at the door, as was her invariable custom. Instead, he found her hanging over the bed on which her baby lay ill—so ill that Belshazzar, on first seeing it, turned pale for Istar's sake. And the look that he found in her face, when, with a glad cry that he had come, she turned it to him, sent a pang to his heart.

Istar's child, the fruit of her earth-love, had cost her her godhead, but had returned her joy a thousandfold dearer than divinity had been. Only now, as she stood bending over the helpless little form, racked as it was with mortal pain, did the greatest world-horror, the horror of death, first lay its hold upon her. The thought that this little being whom she had brought into the world—whom, day and night since its coming she had cherished with an all-powerful love and joy—*could* die, could cease to live for her forever, rushed over her as the waters close over the head of a drowning woman.

Until an hour before the coming of Belshazzar, Istar had been alone with the child, believing it to be suffering from some infantine ailment. But finally the little creature's fever was so manifestly high, and its distress so great, that she had commanded the attendance of the new rab-mag, a man widely celebrated for the potency of his charms. He came at once, examined the baby from head to foot, and noted certain things that caused him to turn to the mother with a look of deep anxiety.

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"Great lady," he said to her, "thou wilt do well to leave this child alone, though before dawn it die. I, Kidish-Nindar, say it. Accept my words, and put the child from thee for the sake of the Great City over which thy husband rules!"

Then Istar, in fear and amazement—quickly and sharply dismissed the man from her presence and turned again to the infant, that lay now in a quiet stupor. It was so that Belshazzar found her, wetting the child's forehead with her tears, pouring forth mingled prayers and the incoherent, birdlike talk of a mother, while her own face took on the color of chalk, and her eyes were bright with a dread to which she would not, even to herself, give form.

The king, for a moment, took her place over the infant, and stood regarding him while Istar told the story of the rab-mag's desertion. Belshazzar would have commanded his return had not the mother forbidden it. But when his displeasure had cooled a little, the king began to ponder over the evident fear of Kidish-Nindar; and finally, bidding Istar remain where she was, he took the

child in his arms, carried it across the room, and seated himself with it upon his knees directly under a light. His back was turned to the divan, and Istar did not see what he did. When he had finished his examination and carried the faintly moaning child back to its place, he went over to her, and she could not but start with dismay at the ghastly pallor that had come upon him. Rising, she laid both hands upon his arm, looking silently, wistfully, into his sad eyes.

"My lord!" she whispered, fear unlocking her lips.

Belshazzar, knowing the ineffable tenderness of her motherhood, could not tell her what he knew. He said only: "Beloved, we will watch together through the night." [Pg 415]

But before that watch began Belshazzar left Istar's rooms for the space of half an hour while he sought the apartment of Kidish-Nindar. The rab-mag was frantically purifying his body and repeating mingled prayers and exorcisms, in the hope of warding off that which he so unspeakably dreaded. The king, by means of threats and bribes adroitly alternated, extorted from the man an oath of silence, and then left him grovelling on his knees before an image of Sin, while he, the king of Babylon, returned to the vigil of his child.

Through the long night they sat together, man and wife, by the bedside of the child. Together they watched the progress of that terrible disease of which Istar was so happily ignorant. Together they saw the flame of life struggle with the suffocating darkness in which it burned. And they saw the little light grow feebler, and the flame flutter in the wind that came across the dark valley of the beyond. Istar's brain reeled and her heart grew sick. Still, as she sat with her gaze fixed on the drawn face of the child, unconscious that Belshazzar's eyes were always upon her, she refused to believe what was too apparent.

And there came a time in the early dawn when the mother could hold away no longer. Lifting the baby from its place, she clasped it close to her breast, carried it across to the soft divan, and lay down with the little, fever-flushed body pressed warm over her heart. In this position her eyes, weary with the long vigil, closed; and while she slept the day broke. Belshazzar remained close at her side to watch the end alone. He could not have told what it was that caused him to lift up his hands there in the faint light, groping for something to which to cling, for some higher power that should ease the terrible aching of his heart. Suddenly the world had become a vast waste, and he was in it alone, helpless and unutterably weary. And it was still without the hand of God to help him that he saw the end come—the death of Istar's happiness and of his own. It was while Istar still quietly slept that the white shadow passed into space. And the woman awoke to find Belshazzar's hand in hers, and the little body lying stiff and rigid across her bosom. [Pg 416]

When Istar realized what had happened she made no outcry. She sat clasping the lifeless form tighter to her own. Tearless, speechless, motionless, she sat alone with that unbearable thing that mortals know as the death-sorrow. Pitilessly it ate its way into her vitals. She forgot everything that had been in her heart before. She was unconscious of any living presence. She was bereft—bereft—and of her offspring. It was in her mind to curse the God that had conceived such suffering and put it upon man. And then there came a touch upon her arm that stilled all her rebellion. Belshazzar's tears fell hot upon her cheek. Without a word she lifted up to him the baby that was also his: and, when he took it in his arms, she crept again over to the pillows, and as she laid her face among them, the blessed tears came forth, and she could weep.

How long she lay there no one knew. Belshazzar had carried away the body—the little body that had been hers; and when he returned to her he brought a cup of wine. The child was gone. As he lifted her up in his arms she asked a mute question with her eyes, and he answered her softly:

"The baby, most beloved, is gone. Our eyes may not again behold him. Some day—some day—" he got no further. For an instant Istar had looked at him in a dull, meaningless sort of way. Then, no longer knowing what she did, her nerves suddenly giving way, she threw herself upon him in blind anger, struggling like one gone mad, crying that he had stolen her child from her, screaming till her voice was gone and her strength gave way, and she fell into his arms a helpless, lifeless form. [Pg 417]

Later in the day, when, with invincible patience and tenderness, he had soothed her into quietude and had gone forth to his inevitable duties, Baba came—Baba, who, since her day in the house of Égibi, had been Istar's constant companion.

Baba had come to love Istar's child almost as Istar herself loved it. When, therefore, the little slave first came to the mother, she could speak no words of comfort. Her tears flowed faster than Istar's own, and she could only grieve beside the queen. Yet in some way this human woe brought to Istar's lonely heart its first breath of comfort and of hope. In the evening she began to speak to Baba of many half-forgotten things—of her own mysterious birth, of her dim remembrances of a great preceding existence, of those beings that had sometimes come to her on earth from space. In the last few weeks Istar had become almost utterly oblivious of her one-time divinity. Natural life and natural love had so blunted her former faculties of perception that the past remained only as a misty background to her life. Yet as her mind struggled to pierce the mists that hid from her the glory of bygone days, a longing was born within her heart—a longing ill-defined, yet so strong that she made, perforce, painful efforts to formulate it.

"I have beheld the glory of the setting sun—the pale light of the newly risen moon. The murmur of waters came to me as I slept. I beheld great lakes and white palaces, and high towers shining in the morning light. The scent of the lotus filled the air, and the rustle of the wind was in the palm-trees. Tell me, my Baba—tell me that for which I thirst! Tell me the great desire of my

heart! Tell me, oh my Baba, where, in the same hour, have I known all these perfect things?"

Baba, gazing at her with the big, wondering eyes that had never in all her little life shone with the light of complete happiness, understood the words of her golden lady. "I will bring the great comfort to thee," she said. "Wait till I come again." And, rising, she left the palace.

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Through two still hours Istar waited there with her heart-sorrow, trusting in Baba to bring that for which she thirsted. And at last, when she had grown weary with waiting, Baba came again, and with her some one else—Charmides, with his burnished hair and his pale, gaunt face, carrying his lyre in his hand. With a silent obeisance to Istar, he stood off at a little distance, and, opening his lips, began to sing.

Then, indeed, came the glory of the setting sun, the pale light of the newly risen moon, with the whisper of waters and the shining gold of great lakes. And around fair white towers and palaces hung the scent of lotus flowers, and the murmur of the evening wind was in the palm-trees. All things far and beautiful came home in the same hour to Istar's senses. And as he sang again, the tears of mingled joy and woe flowed from her eyes. Once more, and music, which is divine, opened divinity again before her vision, and she rose up transfigured, crying:

"Allaraine! Allaraine! Mine eyes behold thee once again!"

Then the moment of fire faded, and she was alone with only Charmides and his careworn, ethereal face, singing on in the fragrant accents of his Sicilian land, till Istar's passion faded gently away, and she smiled a little, and her eyelids grew heavy with sleep. Presently her flower-like head drooped forward. The frail, white hands fell from where they had been clasped upon her breast. Baba drew her down upon the divan, and when Charmides' voice died at length away, a great silence was in the room. Baba and the Greek were alone together. Charmides stood transfixed, his eyes fastened upon the sleeping figure of her whom he had once worshipped. He was roused from the look by a touch on his hand. Baba was kneeling at his side, and her lips were pressed to the fingers that had touched the magic lyre-strings, bringing peace to the soul of Istar of Babylon.

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And thereafter ten days passed away, and it was the time of the great yearly feast of Tammuz, the beautiful god of spring.

XVIII THE FEAST OF TAMMUZ

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The midsummer month, Abû, dedicated to the "Queen of the Bow," was ushered in with heat intense, suffocating, and unendurable. The second day of the month was the sixteenth of the siege—so-called. The camp of the Elamite remained perfectly passive. No preparations for fighting had been made, neither battering-ram nor catapult constructed, not an arrow let fly from the bow, not a pebble from the sling. The great body of stout warriors from the vigorous north remained in demoralizing idleness, broiling in their tents, sleeping by day, living and suffering at night, while the city they coveted lay quiet, half lifeless, on the plain before them.

The time had come for the great religious festival celebrated each year in the Babylonian temples by priest, king, and people, in honor of Istar's murdered spouse, Tammuz, the young god of spring, slain by the fierce bolts of high-riding Shamash. This feast was of three days' duration, and began at the hour of the first sacrifice on the morning of the second of the month. It was the most important festival in the calendar, and never yet in the history of the city had its celebration, for any reason whatsoever, been neglected. And this year the royal decree concerning it was issued as usual.

In the week that preceded the prospective holiday, however, the lord of Babylon was subject to some unaccountable forebodings with regard to this feast. Outwardly, as any one could see, the city was quiet enough. Inwardly it seethed. This, of course, Belshazzar knew. But of the extent or the trend of the plot, neither he nor any of his partisans was aware. His ears could not hear what was talked of at noon in the houses of Zicarû. His eyes could not see the well-hidden rooms in which priests and people met to talk over wrongs that the citizens had never thought of before, but which their indefatigable preceptors skilfully pointed out to them. Nor did Belshazzar much heed the harangues that daily followed morning sacrifice in every temple. He hardly noticed how immense were the crowds in attendance at sacrifice now; and those of the lords and the soldiers that did notice, refused to think lucidly, but put it all down to anxiety over the siege and a wish to propitiate the gods. Still, blind, deaf, utterly insensible as were the king and all his councillors to the only open evidences of treachery in the city, there was no one of them that did not, however vaguely, feel treachery in the air, and dread accordingly.

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In the days between the fall of Sippar and the feast, Nabonidus had not once, so far as his son knew, been inquired for by man, woman, or priest in the Great City. If anything were said in the palace it was in whispers too careful to reach the royal ears. Belitsum, still overcome by the

prophet's dream, had gone into an uncertain retirement; but the remainder of the harem went thoughtlessly and light-heartedly about their occupations, adding to their usual aimless lives the pleasure of preparing for the great holiday, now so near at hand.

The demi-god Tammuz, beloved of the love-goddess (as Spring and Love have been forever wedded in myth and song) had no proper place of worship in Babylon. His romantic death, however, was celebrated in every temple of the city and the suburbs on the same days. From time immemorial it had been the custom for the royal household—men, women, children, slaves, officers, and servants—to remove into the great hall of the temple of Bel-Marduk, where the high-priest was accustomed to officiate.^[12] Here for three days they remained, engaged in mingled prayer and revelry, the one forbidden refreshment being that only one which could betoken forgetfulness of the gods and the purposes of the feast—sleep.

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In consequence of this, for a week after the festival of the death of Spring, the Great City was wont to wear the aspect of a city of the dead; for every one in it moved out from the temple in which he had celebrated the great event, straight to his bed, and there remained till his vitality was restored to him.

According to custom, then, on the night of the first of July Babylon was in a ferment of activity. Houses were preparing for temporary desertion, stripped of costly hangings and furniture, which were stowed where they might be out of reach of sacrilegious marauders, while holiday garments and ornaments, the costliest that each household could afford, were making ready for wear on the morrow. In every garden garlands were woven. In the temples, priests and eunuchs were at work setting up tables and divans, hanging flower-ropes and wreaths over the images of Tammuz that were placed in each house of worship. All night chariots rattled through the streets, and men shouted to each other from house to house. Great droves of bullocks and goats, and immense numbers of fowls and doves, were conveyed to the temporary sheds erected on each temple-platform, in anticipation of the needs of the sacrifices. To the casual observer everything might have appeared exactly as usual. There was none to know how many secret weapons were slipped into the broad girdles of the citizens' holiday dresses. There was none to wonder why, at some time between midnight and dawn, a Zicari, or some member of the priesthood, stopped at almost every house in the common quarters to whisper certain final instructions in the ear of the householder. And from the great height of Nimitti-Bel, the members of the city guard failed, in the darkness, to perceive that the black camp of the invader was not at rest.

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There were two men in Babylon aware of all these things, and these two sat together, like spiders in the great web of their spinning, watching throughout that fervid night. They were in the house of the high-priest of Bel, on the east side of the Â-Ibur-Sabû; and one of them was Amraphel, the master of the house, while the other was Beltishazzar the Jew. They did not talk, for there was little to speak of. Their plan had been long in the making and was perfect at last. Every detail was at the finger-tips of both of them. And it had been only a consciousness of the gigantic consequence of their plan, and the probable monstrous results of it, that made its originators instinctively draw together on the eve of its fulfilment. Neither of them was nervous in the presence of the other, for one of these men perfectly complemented his companion. The great intellect and the talent for broad strokes of policy that had made Amraphel's position what it was, was completed by the abnormal characteristics of craft and foresight possessed by the Jew. Amraphel's courage was the outcome of his great pride. Daniel's bravery was that of the enthusiast, the fanatic, the leader of men—tempered always with a species of cowardice, the cowardice that was to give Babylon over to other hands than his for government.

Thus here, in the silent interior of Amraphel's vast palace, sat the two traitors, inwardly communing, outwardly silent, throughout the long night of the first of July, while Babylon raged within, and Belshazzar dreamed feverishly in the house of his dead father.

Morning—the morning of the second of Ab—dawned over the city. On the lips of every man was the name of Tammuz. In the heart of every man were the mingled emotions of excitement, of dread, of vague desire. The palace of the king was, early in the day, the scene of confused preparation. Only one person in it experienced no sensation of pleasurable excitement at the prospect of the coming feast; Istar, still mourning her unspeakable loss, had spent the night in accustomed grief, to which this time something was added—a vague sense of dread, of undefined foreboding. At early dawn, before the palace was awake, Belshazzar came in to her, and his eyes were dark with trouble. Istar looked searchingly into his face before she spoke.

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"What is the woe of my lord? Thou hast not slept, Belshazzar?"

"Yea, beloved, I have slept—and dreamed: dreamed till my head is on fire. Let thy hands cool the burning of mine eyes. Let thy words still the fears that are rising in my heart. Istar, I have spoken this night with the spirit of my father, who bade me welcome—home."

Istar gave a sharp cry, and the color fled from her face.

"It was a vision, a wandering dream; and yet it has brought foreboding in its train. Bring me comfort, Istar, my beloved."

"Comfort, lord of my heart! Comfort! Ah! I have none of it. Since my baby is taken from me, my heart weeps. O Belshazzar, thou king, let us not ask for comfort. Let us rather mingle our tears before the seat of God; and from our grief shall spring the blessing of the divine comfort. My heart weeps. Why, then, should my lips smile? Thou, dear lord, remainest to me. If thou wert

gone I should not weep, for with thee my life, too, would go. My lord—my lord—I love thee so!"

Quickly Belshazzar caught her in his arms, crushing her to him in an embrace wherein all their earthly and spiritual love mingled together in one supreme moment of ecstasy. When his arms unclosed, both were faint. Istar lay back upon her couch, her eyes shut, her breath coming with difficulty; while Belshazzar stood over her, looking down at her beauty with a sudden feeling of sweet, ineffable peace.

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Now the day had fully broken, and the whole palace was alive. Belshazzar took tender leave of his wife, for the two of them were to go different ways to the temple: Istar in her litter with the members of the harem, Belshazzar in his golden chariot, by the side of the high-priest.

"My lord shall see me clothed all in black and silver; nor, through the three days, will I uncover my face before the eyes of those assembled," whispered Istar, as he knelt for the last instant beside her.

"On the evening of the third day, beloved, thou must unveil. Tammuz, like our child, is dead; yet in their grief the women disclose their features. So also shalt thou. Now, fare thee well—till once again we are alone together here."

Istar started nervously, and then rose to her feet with a sudden impulse. "Belshazzar, wilt thou guard thyself in the temple? Wilt thou not have thy men of Gutium at thy side?"

"How had you known that, Istar? Such a thought never came to me before; yet now—this year—I have commanded that my whole regiment, with their arms, be gathered together in the temple with my regular household. Why I have done this thing I myself know not. And yet—and yet—"

Istar put her arms about his neck. "Let the great God be thanked!" she whispered, earnestly. "And I also—I also will be with thee. If harm comes, we shall be together to the end."

Finally Belshazzar left her and went to his own rooms to see that all preparations for the great feast were made. Istar, in the mean time, covered herself with the long, black, silver-shot veil that she had worn in the days of her loneliness; and, robed only in this and her white tunic, without jewel or ornament of any kind, she sat alone in her room till it came to be the time of setting forth. A eunuch announced that her litter waited; and, attended by two slaves with fans, she walked out to the great court-yard of the palace.

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Here, indeed, was a scene of the liveliest confusion. Men, women, children, and eunuchs of every type, all in holiday dress, all noisily talking and laughing, moved about among groups of chariots, litters, richly caparisoned donkeys, and two or three camels; for, on the way to and from the feast, the meanest slave was never asked to walk. Istar was the first of the royal party to appear in the court-yard, and her mourning costume created much comment of a disappointed character. Her veiled face and melancholy gait cast a shadow over the general merriment of the lower class, among whom, indeed, Istar was not popular. Her litter, however, was quickly brought to her, and just as she lay down in it, happy to be out of sight, Belitsum, the dowager, appeared. Her mood was quite different from that of her quasi daughter-in-law. She had cast aside her widow's weeds, as was her privilege, for the three feast-days; and her stout person was gorgeously arrayed. A band of flashing jewels held her head-cloth in place above her eyebrows, and she waddled along to a jingling accompaniment of bells that were fastened on her ankles and strings of dangling beads that hung from her waist. Her laughter sounded high and shrill as she tossed some light-hearted jest to the line of attendants that followed her; and the whole court-yard responded to her wit with mighty roars of laughter. Now, indeed, Belitsum was in her element. It took her full fifteen minutes to settle herself in her litter, and she was only then finally fixed because the appearance of Belshazzar put an end to any further by-play for the benefit of the on-lookers.

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Belshazzar hastily mounted his chariot, and, the signal for the start being immediately given, there was a mad scramble for vehicles, donkeys, and camels, and the royal procession passed through the gate of the palace.

The temple of Marduk, in which the king kept the feast of Tammuz, was the largest temple in Babylon, and the only important one on the east bank of the Euphrates. At the other end of the great bridge, Amraphel, clad in the fullest insignia of his office, joined the king at the head of the line of the royal household. Their way led along the Mûtaqutû, the smaller of Nebuchadrezzar's two boulevards; and it was lined with people that risked the possibility of being late at the opening sacrifice in their temples in order to see this imposing spectacle. For the first time in a year Belshazzar was cheered along his way. And there was something in the voices of the people that went home to the heart of the uncrowned king; so that, for the first time in his life, his eyes were wet with the tears of love that royalty should feel for its children.

One incident only disturbed the dignity of the march. Belitsum, the irrepressible, had barely managed to contain herself in solitude when the curtain of her litter finally shut her away from the eyes of the admiring throng. But now she was consoled by the fact that, though she was herself unseen, she could comfortably watch the crowd that lined the streets through which she passed. The procession was more than half-way to the temple when her sharp eyes suddenly caught sight of a man that stood watching the procession from the left side of the street. Meanly dressed and dull-eyed as he was, she nevertheless recognized in him her new prophet, the man of dreams.

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Quickly thrusting her head from her slow-moving equipage, she cried to one of her bearers,

pointing at the same time to the object of her curiosity:

"Shusu-Sin! Shusu-Sin! Who is that man there—he of the brown tunic and the rose-topped cane? Speak!"

The bearer glanced round in an embarrassed fashion as the crowd craned forward to look at the queen. He had no difficulty in recognizing the man she designated. Then, leaning backward, towards the waiting ear of the dowager, he whispered, discreetly:

"He on whom the eyes of the queen have deigned to rest is Beltishazzar the Jew, called of his people Daniel."

"A Jew!" cried Belitsum, in amazement. Then, catching the innumerable eyes fixed upon her in wonder or in amusement, she dove hastily back into her litter, carrying with her the long-desired knowledge.

Meantime, at the head of the procession drove Belshazzar and Amraphel, side by side, in their golden chariots. Beyond the requisite first salutation, neither of them had spoken on the whole way, till, at a quarter of an hour before the time set for the first sacrifice, the royal vehicles halted in the great square of Marduk. Here was something at sight of which Amraphel started anxiously. In that square, south of the main entrance of the temple, drawn rank on rank in matchless array, spear, helmet, and sword flashing in the sun, was Belshazzar's guard, the famous regiment of Gutium. They had been waiting here all the morning, under command of their lieutenant, at the orders of their commander. And now, as the king drew near, they made the royal salute, and quietly closed ranks in preparation for marching. Belshazzar, giving them a long, sweeping salute, suddenly halted his chariot. The high-priest, in extreme anxiety, did the same. Then the king shouted three orders, all of them barely comprehensible to a civilian. But Amraphel's ears were sharp; his wits sharper. At the last command his face grew crimson with anger.

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"What means this?" he asked, hoarsely, turning on the king. "Think you these dogs shall be admitted to the holy temple?"

Belshazzar barely turned his head towards the speaker. "What sayest thou?" he asked, coolly.

"It is against the laws of the gods that armed men should enter into their places of worship."

"I had not heard it," returned the king. "And it is my will that this, my regiment, follow me into the temple. How"—suddenly he turned full on the priest—"how wilt thou gainsay me?"

Amraphel drew back into himself. What had Belshazzar heard? How much did he know? Could he indeed, with this handful of soldiers, hold that temple of Marduk against the army of Cyrus and the Babylonish mob? It was a question that was not easy to answer. Do what he would, Amraphel was for the moment sorely nonplussed. He could see nothing for it but to submit. It was thorough defeat; for, fifteen minutes later, fifty members of the priesthood, the whole of the royal household, and the regiment of Gutium, five hundred strong, had entered the temple of Bel-Marduk.

Almost incredibly vast was the great hall of this, the greatest temple of the first of Babylon's twelve great gods. In it the seven hundred people that entered found plenty of room—more than enough room to spread themselves about at will. The vast walls, which towered up to a tremendous height, were richly adorned in the lower half with bas-reliefs illustrating various religious myths: the council of the gods; Bel-Marduk's combat with Tiamât the dragon; and Oannes the fish-god, giver of wisdom, expounding religion to the throngs of people that came down to hear him on the shores of the gulf of the setting sun. Above these sculptures ran bands of history, in the immaculate cuneiform, giving the story of Babylon from the time of her founding down to to-day. Still over this, on the enamelled tiles that carried the walls on up to the dim and shadowy roof, were the decorations for the feast. Great cloths of silk and muslin, elaborately and beautifully embroidered, fell, softly luminous, in the glowing light. Ropes of flowers were everywhere festooned; and their fragrance alone would have rendered the air rich. Their breath, however, vied with streams of incense, with showered perfumes, with fragrance of the sweet myrrh and Indian spices that burned along the walls in braziers of beaten brass. Finally, the light from the scene itself furnished sweetness to the room; for, from a thousand well-wrought hanging-lamps came flickering, golden flames, fed with the rarest perfumed oil.

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The preparations for the feast and for the innumerable sacrifices, with which the feasting was to be varied, had been carefully made. The back rooms of the temple had been converted indiscriminately into kitchens, larders, and stables for the animals to be used for the sacrifice. Here an army of slaves was already at work, and there were half a hundred temple eunuchs, clad in spotless white, with collars of gold and caps of Tyrian purple, to minister to the wants of the feasters.

The great hall had been prepared with infinite care for the reception of the worshippers. In the back of the room, facing the entrance, and raised ten feet above the floor, was the platform on which stood the shrine of Tammuz. On the broad space before the holy of holies, carpeted with rugs, lighted by jewel-crusted lamps, were the divan and table of the king, who was to keep this place during the three days of the feast. At the foot of the steps leading up into this high place was the sacrificial altar, on which a fire was kept burning continuously; and to the right and to the left of this stood other images of Tammuz. Here, for six hours by day and six by night, was the

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place of the high-priest. During the rest of the time he lay above, on a couch beside that of the king, or, if he chose, moved from place to place at the long tables that lined the walls and filled the central spaces of the hall. At these tables rank was not observed, and the lord of the treasury and the meanest slave of the harem might be found side by side. These matters, however, adjusted themselves. Men sat with their chosen friends, or moved about from hour to hour as they wished, while the women generally remained in groups at the upper end of the hall.

To-day Ribâta, in company with the lords of the palace, took his place immediately below Belshazzar's platform, while his slaves were just beyond them, to the right. The soldiers of Gutium were in a body at the end of the hall, lying awkwardly enough on their silken couches, and dreaming grimly of nights in the watch-towers on the walls when they feasted according to their taste. On the right hand of the great hall, quite alone, at a solitary table under the figure of Bel on the wall, sat the one being to whom this festival was not a thing of joy. Istar, veiled from head to foot, uncrowned, unadorned, unattended, sat alone on her couch, gazing straight before her, wrapped in grief and foreboding, hearing nothing of what went on about her. Belshazzar from his place, and Baba from where she mingled with the slaves, watched her when they could; and for many hours that day it seemed to them that she did not move; and their bodies grew weary with the thought of how she stayed there, rigid and untiring.

As soon as the great company was assembled and each had found a place, the first sacrifice of the day was made. Two under-priests led in a snow-white bullock with gilded horns, his body twined with lotus flowers and his feet bound with golden chains. [Pg 432]

This animal was led once round the room, while every one rose, prostrated himself before it, and remained standing through the whole sacrificial ceremony. Amraphel performed the slaughter in the name of Tammuz. Then a short incantation was made. The blood of the dead creature was poured out upon the altar, and the carcass was then carried away to be flayed, dressed, and cooked. This ceremony formally opened the festival, and it was followed by a loud chant led by the priests, in which the praises of Tammuz and Istar were set forth. In the midst of this singing the first wine was brought. Flagon after flagon of the purple juice of Helbon, of Lebanon, of Izalla, of Tuhimme, of Zimini, and of Opis in Armenia was emptied down the eager throats of both men and women. Very shortly the scene took on a different aspect. Laughter came freely. Voices rose clearer and higher, and snatches of song echoed under the high roof. The music of the lutes and cymbals caused more than one woman to rise and fall into that slow, sinuous, dreamy posturing, called, in the East, dancing. Many sacrifices followed. Goats and lambs were slaughtered by tens and twenties. Doves, fastened neck to neck with fine, silver chains, were killed off by the hundreds: timid, fluttering things, reared for this sacred end in the temple towers, but unable, in their folly, to realize the worthiness of their holy martyrdom. Amraphel and his under-priests admirably performed their tasks. Indeed, Amraphel seemed doubly impressive to-day. His men were exalted with their wine, and everything but the affairs of the hour had slipped from their thoughts.

Only Istar, of them all, looked on unmoved and sad. To-day she saw her lord as never before, crowning the feast in all the splendor of his royalty. Never had the faultless beauty of his physique impressed her so. He stood at the top of the ten steps, directly in front of the arched door-way of the shrine, three golden-robed slaves crouching on either side of him, lifting in his hands a yellow cup of wine that he drank to the men of his guard, to the regiment of Guti. His purple cloak, wrought with long scrolls of burning gold, flowed back from his shoulders. His superb head, its black locks bound about with a twisted fillet in which flashed fifty purple amethysts, was held like that of a conqueror on the day of his greatest victory. Istar caught the flashing of the storm-eyes, saw the lips curve with his deep laughter, watched the gleaming of the jewels on his breast, and then, as he raised the cup to his mouth, she sank back in her place, dizzy and sick at heart. He had forgotten as she could not forget. He thought no more of the little creature he had watched with her, that had lain in his arms so many times warm and breathing with life, and that had been so lately taken from him in death. And at that thought of death a terrible shudder passed over her, and she became still and cold, and intensely weary of the scene of revelry. Slowly she sank back into a reclining position on her couch. She had refused every proffered dish of food, every kind of wine. Her eyelids closed and there came over her a kind of stupor, in which she lay for many hours. It was not sleep, for through it she could hear the sounds in the room, could distinguish Belshazzar's voice whenever he spoke, and always answered the slaves that came reverently to waken her, telling them that she knew all that passed as well as they themselves. And yet Istar was not actually in that room. Nay, she could feel herself alone, at an infinite distance. When, after a long period she opened her eyes again, she saw the scene more than ever full of life. The lamps glowed brighter than before, but through the opening far in the roof no daylight came. The day was over. Night had come. Istar was faint for food, yet she rebelled at the idea of the heavy, half-cooked flesh served in this room; and she thought that possibly, in the rear of the temple, there might be some quiet place where she could break bread and taste of fruit and wine alone and undisturbed. With this thought she rose quietly and moved across to the foot of the shrine, on the platform of which Amraphel and Belshazzar now sat side by side. Here, moved by an irresistible impulse, Istar of Babylon turned to look back on the scene she was leaving. But her eyes, first raised, did not return to the floor. Instead, she stood transfixed, the heart in her wildly throbbing, her head swimming with the overpowering wonder of the sight that met her eyes. Unconscious of what she did, her two hands drew the enshrouding veil from her face, and then there rushed upon her vision such a sight as she had never thought to see again. [Pg 433] [Pg 434]

In the air, above the vast, closed doors, hung Allaraine, in a dazzling cloud of glory, his form all but indistinguishable in the palpitating rays of his aureole. He was without his lyre. In his right hand he held a wand of molten gold, with which he wrote upon the broad space over the doors. He, and that that he wrote, were clearly intelligible to Istar, who gazed on him unnoticed in her place. For Allaraine had come for her, and for her alone was writing his message there upon the wall. This she knew from the first.

But how was it with those others that thronged the hall? Before their blinded spiritual eyes all that was distinguishable were three fingers of the archetype's hand, and the unreadable words of fire that he wrote. Yet these were enough: infinitely more than enough. Amraphel and Belshazzar together, from the high place, first saw the miracle; and from the lips of the king broke forth a cry, a cry that stilled every voice in the temple. All eyes were turned to the shrine, and beheld the dread staring of Amraphel, whose gaze was fixed in dumb terror on the opposite wall. With universal accord every glance followed his, and every eye beheld the gradual fading of the hand and the blazing brilliance of the writing that was left upon the wall. There was no cry from the assemblage. A silence, infinitely more impressive than any sound, fell upon them. For five long minutes none moved or spoke. Istar remained unperceived in her place. Trembling and dazed, her lips moved noiselessly, repeating over and over the words that were written before her:

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"Hast thou found man's relation to God? The silver sky waits for thy soul."

Again and yet again she repeated those two phrases to herself, till, out of the depths of the long-past, their meaning came home to her. Then a faint sigh broke from her lips, a sigh of ineffable weariness, of ineffable relief. She replaced the veil over her face, and, gliding noiselessly back to her couch, lay down upon it with her new knowledge, giving little heed to all that followed.

The voice of Belshazzar broke the spell hanging over the room. His tones startled the company like the clarion blast of a trumpet, as he cried: "Alchîa! Balatû! Ubar! Umarîa! Ye prophets of the great gods, arise and come before me!"

From out of the throng of feasters rose four white-robed men, bare-headed and bare-footed, prophets of Nabonidus' household. Mechanically obeying the words of their lord, they came forth and stood in a row before the steps of the high place.

"Ye that are professed to know the wishes of the gods, interpret now to us that which is written upon the wall."

One by one the four men turned and scanned the wall with its flaming text. And one by one each turned back to the king again, saying, helplessly: "O prince, live forever! I cannot read it!"

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Then Belshazzar's pale face became tinged with red and his eyes blazed with anger. "Look ye again! I say that honor and riches and great power shall be his that interprets these words upon the wall. Look ye again!"

And again they looked. But had the reward for the reading been the kingdom of Babylonia, not one of the four possessed the wit or the courage to interpret to the master that which was unreadable to mortal eyes.

When it was seen in the room how the prophets had failed in their task, the murmurs of many tongues began to be heard against them. The whole throng was tremulous with awe and with fear. Amraphel himself felt it. He gazed helplessly at Belshazzar, never realizing this tremendous opportunity, never perceiving that no situation could possibly have been more desirable than this. It was from a wholly unexpected source that help came to his cause. In the midst of the dread silence that had gradually overpowered the people, Belitsum sprang from her place, and, hurrying as well as she could to the foot of the steps leading up to the shrine, cried out to Belshazzar:

"O king, live forever! Let not thy thoughts trouble thee nor thy countenance be changed. There is a man in thy kingdom in whom is the spirit of the great gods; in whom was found light and understanding and wisdom in the days of thy father's father. What hath he not shown thee and me in the miracle of his dream? Forasmuch as great knowledge and understanding, interpreting of dreams and showing of hard sentences and dissolving of doubts, were found in Daniel, called Beltishazzar, let then that Daniel be called, and he will show the interpreting of the letters of the fiery hand."

Belshazzar heard his step-mother with no little amazement, for he had hardly credited her with either sense or knowledge. But her words recalled to him something that Nabonidus had once said to him regarding this same man, and he made a sudden determination to try him with this difficult feat.

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"Ina-shu-sin!" he shouted to the officer of his house that stood on guard at the door. "Let the door of the temple be opened. Go thou forth into the city and find him that is called Beltishazzar the Jew, bringing him back to the temple. Haste thee!"

The man had not time to acknowledge the command when Amraphel turned quickly to Belshazzar: "Lord prince," said he, softly, "the man Daniel being well known to the priesthood, send thou rather a temple steward to find him. He will appear before thee very shortly."

Belshazzar looked searchingly into the face of the high-priest, but he failed to find there more than a warrantable anxiety. Therefore he replied: "As thou wilt, Amraphel. Inâ-shu-Îbni, let rather

Baza of the temple go to search for the prophet; and watch thou for them from the door, that Daniel, coming, may quickly enter."

The priest Baza, of the third house of Zicarû, put away the cups that he bore, and, catching Amraphel's sign, made his obeisance to the king and hurried from the temple. Just before his disappearance Istar, who had watched the whole scene in silence, half rose from the couch to which she had returned, as if she would have prevented the man's departure. For a second she stood quite still in her upright position, glancing from the letters on the wall to Belshazzar's face. Then she sank back on her couch again without speaking; and as her head once more touched the cushions, Baza disappeared into the night, and Inâ-shu-Îbni shut, but did not fasten after him, the great temple door.

Fifteen minutes passed, and still the dazed throng neither spoke nor moved. They waited for him who could make plain to them the mystery or the miracle that had come upon the feast. At the end of this time the temple door once again softly opened, and a man, dark-robed, bare-footed, gaunt, and sharp-eyed, walked into the room, and straight to the foot of the steps of the shrine. Seeing Belshazzar and Amraphel together above him, he made obeisance to each, and Belshazzar, rising, came to the top of the first step, asking:

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"Art thou that Daniel which art of the captivity of Judah, whom the great king my father's father brought out of Jewry?"

Daniel bent his head.

"It is said of thee that the spirit of the gods, light, wisdom, and understanding, are to be found in thee. Look then, thou leader of Jews, at the wall yonder. Behold what is written on it in letters of fire. If thou canst interpret those strange words, honor and great riches shall be to thee. Look thou, and read."

Obediently, while the gaze of every eye in the room of the feast was fixed upon him, Daniel turned and looked over the door, that had been left ajar, and saw the signs that glowed more faintly now upon the bricks above. For many seconds he stood passive, his black brows knit under the stress of thought. Amraphel grew cold with nervousness. His lips twitched to give the signal that should drown this incident in the flood of something infinitely greater; and he was on the very verge of crying out when the prophet turned and faced the king, a fire of emotion burning in his eyes and in his cheeks. When he opened his lips the room grew breathless, and Istar, shivering in irrepressible fear, hung upon his words:

"O king, the most high God gave Nebuchadrezzar thy forefather a kingdom, and majesty and glory and honor. And for the majesty that he gave him all people, nations, languages, trembled and feared before him. Whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down. But when his mind was lift up and his heart was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne and they took his glory from him. And he was driven forth from the sons of men. His heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was made with wild asses. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that He appointeth over it whomsoever He will.

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"And thou his descendant, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this. Thou hast lifted thyself up against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before thee, thou and thy lords, thy wives and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them. Thou hast worshipped the gods of silver and of gold, and of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear nor know. And the God in whose hands thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified. Then was the part of the hand sent from Him, and this writing was given.

"This is the writing that was written: 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.'

"This is the interpretation of the thing: Mene: God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it. Tekel: thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting. Peres: Thy kingdom is divided—and given to the Medes and Persians!"

The last words were spoken not to Belshazzar nor to any one in the temple. They rose to a shout that was heard outside the half-open temple door. In the moments that followed, Istar, her eyes blazing with wrath and scorn, sprang to her feet and came forth to confront the man of lies. But her lips never showed him false. Even as she lifted up her voice there came from without the sound of a mighty roar of fury. The two doors of the temple were burst apart, and those within found themselves face to face with the army of Cyrus and a vast Babylonish mob.

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XIX THE REGIMENT OF GUTI

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The terrible spell of silence that had spread over the feasters at the temple was broken by a woman's scream. That scream brought men and women alike back to life. With a loud shout Belshazzar the king leaped down the steps of the shrine and ran forward, crying lustily to his

guard to form into line. Old as he was, Amraphel, Cyrus' tool, was an instant before the king; and he, with Daniel the prophet close beside him, made his way through the band of soldiers that had gathered near the door, to the ranks of the enemy, in the vast throng of whom priest and Jew were presently lost to sight.

Meantime Belshazzar hurriedly rallied his men around him, had them quickly in order, and lined them before the opening, from which by this time doors and gates had been entirely torn away. The men of Guti were armored and armed. The scent of battle came to their nostrils. They were at home with it. Their blood tingled with joy, and Belshazzar saw how they would fight for him, every man to the end.

Now came the first sharp volley of arrows and sling-stones from the multitude at the doors. Two or three of the guards fell. The ranks were quickly closed up and the volley answered. Then the range became too short for bows. Men of Elam and Babylonish traitors were hand-to-hand with the defenders of the temple. In the semi-darkness it was hard to distinguish between friend and foe; and the struggle became as man to man. Shouts and cries ascended from the indivisible mass. In the midst of everything rose the trumpet tones of Belshazzar, crying encouragement to his men. But the rich and mellow voice of Cyrus was not to be heard giving commands to the other side. Cyrus was not here to-night. Only the open field and honorable combat were his. And he had left the dishonor of such a victory to Amraphel the high-priest, and Cambyses, his own son, who had asked for it.

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In the temple, behind the ranks of the regiment of Guti, the royal eunuchs, creatures of silent courage and loyalty, had gathered together all the women into one group, round which, for protection, they and the lords of the council were piling the temple furniture into a barricade. Istar alone was not here. Since the first battle-cry no one had seen her; and now, in the excitement of the moment, she, being unseen, was also forgotten.

Baba, in her silks and chains, was with the women of Ribâta's household, all of whom their lord had placed carefully in one corner of the protecting barricade, behind a pile of divans and stone tables laid beside the sacrificial altar. In the rush of the moment Ribâta had but a word with his favorite slave. For an instant, however, he bent over her, to see that she was well protected, and in that time he pressed his lips as a seal against her forehead, muttering hurriedly, at the same time: "Courage, little one! Be not afraid. Our lives are in the hands of the great Bel. Pray to him, but do not weep."

And Baba answered readily, without any sign of fear: "My lord is my lord. I obey his word."

Then, as he left her side, the young girl lay back on the floor close against a couch that had been tipped beside her, and stayed there, silent and open-eyed, listening to the tumult of the battle round the door. The chorus of shouts and yells was deafening. Babylonish battle-cries mingled with Median phrases of triumph. And closer at hand, all around her, in fact, the women of high station lay wailing out their fright. Ribâta's two wives were near, crazed with terror for themselves, for their lord, for Babylon, for the king. Now and then, high above the general tumult, came the shrill, fierce voice of Belitsum, crying her anguish. Nabonidus was the name that continually left her lips, till Belshazzar himself, from the thickest of the fight, caught the syllables, and fought the more fiercely for the memory of his father.

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While the men of Gutium held the door, there appeared to be nothing to fear for the women in the temple. Ribâta, before joining in the conflict, passed among his friends of the council, bidding them hold back a little from the thick of the fight, that, should it prove necessary, they might be unhurt to defend the women. The holders of the temple were in bad enough straits, to be sure, yet there was no immediate danger. Belshazzar's men, flanked by two bands of eunuchs and noblemen, who fought with sacrificial knives and axes, were for the moment holding all Babylon and the army of Cyrus at bay. Baba knew this, as she lay, quiet and silent, gazing up into the shadowy spaces of the roof. Presently, while all that terrible din sounded in her ears, with that throng of writhing, struggling, bleeding men twenty yards away, a little smile stretched itself over her lips, and her eyes fell shut. She lay wrapped in a vision of her own: a vision of fair fields and broad, blue water, where, on the shore, stood a man; a man whose hair shone like the sun, and who bore in his hands a five-stringed lyre. And presently, from out of the racket, she could hear the pure tones of Charmides' voice, singing, as he had always sung throughout his life, for love.

Baba was lying unconscious of her surroundings in this little ecstasy, when suddenly the low wailing of the women was heightened into loud cries of well-warranted horror. The little slave felt a new presence at hand. She lifted up her eyes, and saw something that caused her heart to rise into her throat. The barricade was breaking down before a band of armed temple-servants that were advancing to the murder of the women. A cold stream poured round Baba's heart, and for the first time to-night she screamed aloud. Her cry was answered by Ribâta, who was trying desperately to gather the lords out of the conflict at the door. But the fight there was going badly. More than half the defenders of the temple had fallen, and each of those that remained was pressed by half a dozen of the enemy. Many of the guards had been drawn out into the square and were keeping up the battle there while they lived. But it seemed all at once that the defence could not last many minutes more. Not a man could come to the rescue of the women caught in so terrible a trap. And in the faces of the inhuman creatures that threatened them, there was no hope for their lives. The murderers were nearly all of them Zicarû from the third college, which was Amraphel's own; and into their hearts hatred for the upper classes had been instilled for years. Now, as they looked upon their helpless prey, all the animal savagery of their

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race rose up in them, and their eyes sparkled and their lips twitched in the lust for blood. The wife of Nabû-Mashetic-Urrâ, one of the old councillors of Nabonidus, received the first blow. The knife of a seer struck her to the heart; and with that first gush of blood the general carnage began. Defenceless as they were, the women were roused to action. With their hands, their limbs, their teeth, the pins that fastened their hair, they fought uselessly for life. From the place where she lay half concealed, Baba watched the scenes of murder around her. The woman next her had been dodging the knife that continually pursued her, till, stabbed in a dozen places, hair and body dripping with her blood, she proffered her heart to the assassin, who mercifully plunged his dripping blade up to its hilt in her breast.

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Baba gave a hoarse shriek, threw up her hands, and fell, face down, upon the floor. A second after a streak of fire ran deep into her right shoulder. Then, immediately, all the noise died away. The world reeled with her and became black; and for her this scene of incredible brutality was at an end.

Not so Belshazzar's desperate task. At the moment when the Zicarû, appearing from the back rooms of the temple, had set about the slaughter of the women, the king, in the midst of a little band of five soldiers, had pressed through the front ranks of the enemy, out into the temple square. This was packed with the city mob that had gathered from the feast in the temples of Nebo, Nergal, Istar, and Sin, and come hither under the leadership of their officiating priests. In the darkness it was impossible to tell friend from foe. Belshazzar's self-constituted body-guard fought madly to preserve his life; but, fifteen minutes after they had passed the temple doors, the last of them, wounded in twenty places, had fallen at the feet of his king, and Belshazzar of Babylon was alone with the darkness and with besetting death. Many set upon him where he stood on the eastern edge of the square; but perhaps none of his assailants knew him. He was armed only with a short sword taken from the hand of a dying Elamite; but with this weapon his execution was terrible. As man after man went down before his tigerish strength, the attention of many was drawn to him, and presently he found himself backing down a narrow and crooked street running out of the square, engaged with three men, variously armed, that vainly strove to fell him. An arrow stuck in the flesh of his right forearm, and there was a great gash upon one of his knees. He left behind him a trail of blood; but, in the heat of contest, he felt not a twinge of pain. The noise of the battle perceptibly diminished. He heard it vaguely, caring at this time very little how the fight was going. His adversaries pressed him hard; yet he smiled, as continually he beat them back. The brute, the tiger in him, was uppermost now. He had not a thought for anything but fighting. In his slow and certain way he had retreated perhaps two hundred yards, and was approaching the house of one of the under-priests of Bel. From its open door-way a flood of light poured into the street, and as Belshazzar moved into the luminous spot a cry of recognition broke from the lips of his oppressors. At the same moment a white-robed figure came quickly out of the house, and, unseen by him, moved behind Belshazzar. In the moment that followed, a knife gleamed in the light behind the king. The blow fell. With a great cry Belshazzar reeled, sank to his knee, straightened up again with a superhuman effort, thrust weakly in the direction of the men in front, and sank back on the ground with a faint moan. At the same time his assassin, motioning the three soldiers to go back, stepped in front of his victim and bent over him.

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"Amraphel!" muttered the king.

"Ay, Amraphel, thou dog! Amraphel, thou tyrant of the city! Amraphel, thou last ruler of a hated line! Amraphel, that stands at last alone in the land of his desire! Hear thou, then, the name of Amraphel. Know his everlasting hatred for thee and thine, and knowing—die!" Then, with his sandalled foot, the old man spurned the face of him that was fallen, hoping to bring some craven word to the lips of the king.

But Belshazzar was himself in death as in life. Gazing steadily into the face of the high-priest, he permitted himself to smile—a slight, scornful smile, such as he had sometimes worn during the sacrifice. Seeing it, the high-priest was goaded into a hot fury. With what strength he had he kicked the face of the dying man. Then, drawing his bloody skirts about him, he turned and passed once more into the house of the priest, out of Belshazzar's sight forever.

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So at last the king lay alone, unmolested, with the night and with his thoughts. Babylon was fallen—was fallen the Great City, before the hand of no invader, but by treachery and stealth, by means of murder and of outrage. All this the king knew; yet no regret for the inevitable disturbed these final moments. Rather he turned his mind to that that was his alone, to that which constituted his true, his inner life, that made his great happiness, that had redeemed him from all mental pain—his supreme love for Istar the woman.

In that dim dream into which all surrounding things were fading, her name floated to his lips. Once, twice, thrice he repeated it to himself, lingeringly, adoringly, loving each syllable as he spoke it. He had no thought, no hope of seeing her again. She was somewhere, far away, in the midst of those direful scenes beyond him. He commended her to his gods as best he could. Then he thought of himself as at her side, the mist of her hair hiding the world from his eyes, the perfume of her breath causing his head to swim. He thought of her as she had been to him in the last months. And then—suddenly—she was with him.

Out of the gloom of the narrow street she came, searching after him, calling his name. The veil had fallen back from her pallid face. Her eyes were staring wide with fear and with the horror of blood. Her movement was slow, indeterminate, vague. Not till after he had watched her for a full minute did she come upon his figure in its pools of blood. Then, with a faint, fluttering cry she ran

to him, only half-believing her poor vision. Their meeting was ineffable. She lay upon his body, eye on eye, lip on lip to him, her cries stifled by his gasping breath, her wandering hands caressing his hair, his brow, his neck, his bloody vestment. Not knowing what she did, she pulled the broken arrow from his arm, and then screamed to think of where it had been. Of the two, Belshazzar's state of mind was infinitely clearer, infinitely stronger than hers. It was with a supreme effort that he took his lips from hers that he might speak, might try to make her understand what this moment must be to them.

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"Oh, thou art wounded, my king, my beloved! Look—here upon thee is blood—blood on the white of thy robe. Why art thou red?" she repeated, once and again, anxiously examining the wet, dark stains that flowed ever freshly from his body.

Belshazzar saw that her brain was turned, and his anguish became terrible. Was she to bid him good-bye like this? Must he leave her forever with the infinite unsaid? How could he bring her mind back to him, if but for one moment? He could not think. All that he could do was to say, thickly, with the blood in his mouth:

"Istar, beloved, I die! Dost thou hear?"

"Yea, Belshazzar, and I also. Allaraine hath written it upon the wall. Didst thou not see? 'Hast thou found man's relation to God? The silver sky waits for thy soul.' I also die."

"Thou!" he murmured, quickly. "Art thou wounded, Istar?" His feeble hands searched over her body, but felt no sign of blood. She had been untouched by any weapon. And now his eyes grew dull with suffering, and he said, faintly, and with reluctance: "Fare thee far and well, my Istar—Istar of my city. I go."

"Belshazzar!"

What it had been, tone or word of his, that roused her at last, the dying man could not tell. But that name rang through the night in a scream of living agony. Now she knew what it meant—that her Babylon was fallen around her—that the world was empty—that the lord of her life was passing—that henceforward her way lay through the valley of loneliness. What mattered now the writing on the wall, hopeless prophecy of her own death? Belshazzar was here, beneath her, dying; while she—Istar—his wife—had received no wound.

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She raised him in her arms and their eyes met for the last time. How much passed in the look cannot be told, for it was a final mingling of souls. All their love, their infinite happiness, their sorrow, their tears unshed, the humanity of their two lives, was embodied in that look. Grief of parting was not there, for the two were striving to make parting endurable, each to each, by the look. It was finished at last, with Belshazzar's whispered words:

"In the silver sky, O my glorious one, I wait for thee!"

"O my beloved, wait for me! Wait for me!"

Then the body dropped inert in her arms. Belshazzar was gone. Istar was left alone in the world.

How long afterwards she rose from that place she did not know. Many people—soldiers of the invading army and men of the mob, with blood-dripping swords—had passed her as she lay along the ground, face down, beside the body. And none of these offered to molest her, for they thought that two dead lay there in the semi-darkness. The light in the house of the priest of Bel had gone out, and the shouts of conflict had long since been hushed. Still, through all the city, there was the murmur of uneasiness, of many men awake and stirring. The night was filled with stars, and with that curious white glow that comes in midsummer to the Orient. But it seemed strange that the skies did not turn from the hideous spectacle of Babylon that night.

Forth into the city, from the body that she loved, Istar went. Guided and protected by some divine spirit, she passed unhurt among groups of strange, uncouth warriors that laughed and talked in an unknown tongue. She crossed streets where dead lay piled together. For those that were loyal to the city had not been spared by the men of Amraphel. She passed houses in which sat women wailing out their terror through the long hours before the dawn; and came finally to the open doors of a small temple in which the feast of Tammuz had been celebrated through the day. Before this Istar paused. Inside she could see the glowing of the sacrificial lights and the disorderly desertion of the room—the long, empty tables covered with half-filled cups and plates, and the altar whence, from the smouldering fire, a thin stream of blue incense still poured upward. The woman's weary eyes saw these long, soft divans with a sense of desire and of relief. She entered the room and went quickly towards the nearest resting-place. She was about to lay herself down. Her eyes were all but closed under their weight of weariness, when suddenly, from the shadowy spaces beyond her, came a sound that caused her to start back from the couch, and hasten in nervous terror towards the door. It had been only the bleating of a little group of hungry sheep in their pen near the temple kitchen; yet the unexpected noise had shattered Istar's nerves, and she fared forth again out of the holy house into the long, winding streets of the city.

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Whither she went, how far, with what purpose, no one knew, no one cared. She saw the river winding its tranquil way between well-stoned banks, with the shadows of vast buildings mirrored in its depths, while the glittering stars from their high dome shone like pale, white eyes in the glassy, lazily moving stream. Wandering Euphrates! Took it any heed of the deeds of good or evil performed upon its banks? God had bequeathed to it eternal calm, had made the sight of it an eternal balm for weary eyes. This night it brought peace on its waves and a promise of rest to the

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soul of the woman. As she stood gazing down into its baffling green, there came to her again the message from the kingdom, written in golden letters on the surface of the water. Again Istar read and again she wondered, yet in her soul understood the words:

"Hast thou found man's relation to God? The silver sky waits for thy soul."

Istar, in her great woe, stood looking upon the fiery words, that seemed to have burned themselves into her brain; and her whole heart rebelled against them. Those that she loved had been taken from her. With Belshazzar, the light of her life was extinguished. Man was bound to God only by great suffering, by grief, by heart-sorrow! A sob came into her throat, and there was anger in her mind as she would have turned away from the mystical words. But at that instant they flashed out into darkness, and the gleam was gone. For a moment the night grew thickly black, and Istar reeled where she stood. Afterwards she found herself walking on the bank of the river, only a little distance west of the spot where the huge temple of Marduk reared its bulk into the air. It was now in Istar's mind to go back to the place where Belshazzar's body lay, and to remain there at his side till dawn should banish the horrors of the night. But just as she would have left the river for the second time, there came out upon the path that ran along its bank a group of white-robed men, whom Istar knew for priests, bearing with them a heavy burden covered over with a purple cloth. At sight of them Istar turned suddenly dizzy and crouched on the bricks of the pavement.

Arrived at the edge of the river, the five priests of Amraphel's temple laid their burden on the ground and removed the cloth that covered it. Belshazzar's body was exposed to view. Istar, with a little moan, pressed both hands tightly across her breast. But neither sound nor movement attracted any attention from the priests. These now indulged in a short parley, that ended in their taking from the corpse the royal ornaments that covered it and dividing them evenly among the five.

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"Now, Bel-shar-utsur, tyrant of the city, go down by river to plead with the Lady Mulge in Ninkigal for a drink from the spring of life; for thou shalt drink no more, in the Great City, of the wines of Helbon and Izalla!"

With this only farewell, three of them lifted the body up, swung it thrice in the air by the feet and by the head, and at the third swing let it fly out into the waters of the river that had so short a time before received the worn frame of the dead man's father.

As the body left their hands the priests were startled to hear a long, low cry that came from a few yards to the right. Looking, they saw a woman's figure run to the river-bank and peer into the waters below, where the body of the king, as on a funeral barge, went floating down towards the city of the dead that lay south of Babylon.

Without any attempt at accosting her who mourned, the men of Amraphel presently turned away and began their return to the temple, carrying with them the new wealth of jewels. Istar also rose, half consciously, and knowing neither any abiding-place where to lay her head, nor any one to seek who could give her help, she moved away aimlessly down the bank of the stream. A few yards to the south there was a great ferry station, where, by day, a dozen boats were wont to ply back and forth across the stream. By night only one barge went its way backward and forward; and as Istar came down to the little quay the broad scow was just ready to start to the western shore with its load of men and soldiers. She ran quickly down the steps and on to this moving bridge. The west bank of the river was home to her. She knew its streets and its people. There, to the north, was the palace of Belshazzar, and the temple in which she had once dwelt. There, somewhere, she would find shelter.

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When the barge finally touched the landing at the western shore and Istar, last of any one, was about to leave it, she was stopped by one of the ferrymen.

"Lady, it is two *se* for the passage."

"Two *se*! Money? I have none," said Istar, slowly.

"Thou shalt not leave the barge till the price is paid," retorted the boatman, angrily.

But vaguely understanding what he meant, Istar pulled the veil from her face and fixed her great eyes upon him, the better to comprehend what it was he told her. The man gave a great start, for in the semi-darkness her marvellous beauty shone like a star. Then the rough fellow bent his head before her.

"It is the lady of Babylon! Great Istar, forgive our fault! Let it please thee to leave the barge!" he exclaimed, reverently.

Istar did not pause to wonder that he knew her. She saw that her way was open, and she went forth, up the steps, across the path at the top, and into the lower city. Too weary, too stricken for either rest or sleep, she felt her brain burn and her limbs grow cold as she walked. Now there was a fire in her veins; now they grew chill as the snows of Elam. In the pale gray of the dawn she trembled with sickness. The coming of day was not beautiful to her eyes. In the first pink flush from the east she found herself standing before a miserable hut on the border of a canal, and from the dark door-way came a voice crying in great fear:

"The plague! The plague! It is come upon us! Behold the gods visit their wrath upon men! Woe, woe to them that see light in Babylon to-day!"

Istar shuddered at the cry. From another place farther to the north the words of horror and grief were repeated. The reign of death was thus proclaimed in the city. Now there was a great ringing in Istar's ears. Lights shot up before her eyes. It seemed to her that over all the city, from the five millions of human tongues, rose that cry of woe: "The plague! The plague!"

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The memory of her dead child was with her. A few more paces she staggered through, half consciously. Then, of a sudden, some one appeared beside her—some one whom she knew and had forgotten. At sight of the well-known face the woman's brain gave way. With a long, heart-broken sob, she fell helpless, lifeless, into the reverent arms of Charmides, her bard.

XX PESTILENCE

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It was thus that, on the night of July 3d, in the year 538 B.C., Persian rule began in Babylon, and native rule in the Great City was ended forever.

Historically this was true. In actual fact, on the morning of July 4th—ay, and for many weeks thereafter—no man knew the real ruler of the city, and no man greatly cared to know him. Every soul within the walls was occupied with a far more terrible and more engrossing matter, and officer and priest alike obeyed orders of Cyrus that passed through the lips of Amraphel, without caring whence they were issued or why. Cyrus the king, his sons, and the most of his army remained encamped without the walls. Gobryas had returned to the governorship of Sippar. Amraphel, unable to find any loop-hole for escape, remained shut up in his palace, miserably afraid, not even venturing to sacrifice in the temple for dread of the curse that hung over the city. Every place of worship, indeed, was deserted. In the middle of the temple of Bel-Marduk the hideous pile of dead still lay behind their barricade, just as they had fallen on the night of the massacre. Men not cowards at other times fled that building and the square and all the neighborhood, as a place of the damned. The air around was thick with the stench of death; and no command of Cyrus could force one of his men near enough to the spot to wall up the open space between the shattered doors.

Plague reigned supreme in Babylon. The black death, that horror of horrors that occasionally swept upon the great nations of the East, like the scourge of God smiting every man in its path, leaving behind it a wake of dead, dying, and miserable bereft, had entered into the beleaguered city. It was for this that Amraphel stopped ears and eyes and remained a prisoner behind the thick, white walls of his palace, where the chorus of woe could not penetrate to him. And day by day Daniel the Jew interpreted, to those that would hear, the meaning of this further wrath of God against them that had so long allowed themselves to be governed by such a one as Nabonidus, descendant of Nebuchadrezzar. Indefatigably Daniel, plague-marked and immune long years ago, preached the wrathful word of his death-bearing Lord; and such was his success among these pagans that it became a not uncommon thing to behold some woman, swollen and spotted, inexpressibly repulsive and pitiable to look at, with the final frenzy upon her, kneeling in street or hovel before the wooden image of a demon, and frantically calling upon the god of the Jews to remove from her both the curse of life and the after-terrors of hell, and to plunge her into the longed-for peace of utter annihilation.

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By the middle of the month bodies could not be buried, but lay piled in streets and houses, till Babylon became the true city of Mulge, Queen of the Dead. Those that knew, those that had gone through the visitation of thirty years before, felt their hearts fail them as they thought of what was still to come. Many, indeed, tried to leave the city; but Cyrus' soldiers patrolled every gate, and any having about them the mark of death were not allowed to pass.

Charmides the Greek was not among those that attempted an escape. By every tie that he held sacred he was bound to his adopted city, and it was his one desire to do what little he might to help the sufferers of the plague.

At dawn on the fourth of Ab, the morning after the fall of the city, Ramûa and Beltani sat together in their tenement, waiting, watching, more than all wondering at the strange sounds that had come to them as faint echoes of the great happenings of the night. Neither of them had gone to celebrate the feast in any temple. Plead or storm as Beltani would, she found Charmides fixed in his wishes on this point, and in tears and bitterness of spirit she found it necessary to move forward for an entire year all her dreams of three days of unlimited wine and meat. The Greek, who had gone back to temple-service almost immediately after his meeting with Belshazzar on the day of Daniel's attempted assassination of the king, knew enough of what was likely to happen in the first night of the feast to forbid his family to participate in it. And while Beltani had raged, and even Ramûa had shed a few submissive tears when Charmides departed for the temple of Sin, the two of them watched quietly through the night and eagerly awaited the promised early return of the master of the household.

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Very early in the evening came vague mutterings of distant, gathering mobs. Much later were the still more indeterminate but more ominous sounds of battle, shouts and cries, with the underlying murmur grown more fierce. Afterwards fell the great silence—a silence in which no man could sleep, something more terrible than sound, something that foreboded direful things—carnage, murder, merciless death. At this time the name of Baba first passed the lips of the waiting

women. Baba was in Ribâta's train at the temple of Bel-Marduk. Baba, a slave, stood no chance of salvation if any were to be lost. Had she lived or had she died that night? Through the silence that lasted till dawn this unspoken question lay in the hearts of the watchers. And then, with the first streaks of day, their thoughts were turned again by something else, another cry more awful than any battle-shout, that rose like a mist from every hovel in the tenement quarter.

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"The plague—the plague! Woe unto us! It is the plague!"

It was as if every soul in the city was become a leper, and each was crying his disease. At the first sound of it Ramûa's heart turned sick within her, and Beltani became as white as the dawn. For Beltani could remember the last plague in Babylon.

"Charmides! Why does he stay?" whispered Ramûa to her mother, over and over again; and it was the only word that passed between them till, with the first beams of the sun, the Greek was seen coming into the square in front of the tenement. At sight of him Ramûa gave a little cry:

"He is not alone!"

"It is not Baba," added Beltani, quickly.

Then the two of them watched in silence while Charmides advanced with his companion, a tall, slender woman covered with the silver-woven veil, who faltered as she moved, till Charmides was nearly carrying her. At the first glance Ramûa perceived that the Greek was weary, so weary that every step was an effort to him. Thus, when he finally reached the door of the dwelling, she ran quickly forward to give him aid.

"The night has been very long. Thou must rest," she whispered, disregarding the stranger, who drooped as they halted at the door.

"Nay, Ramûa. Nay. I am not weary," returned the Greek, monotonously. "Behold, I bring home to you Istar, the great lady of Babylon. In this night she, and all in the Great City, have terribly suffered. Babylon is fallen to Kurush the king, and Belshazzar, the mighty prince, and all that were with him in the temple of Bel, are slain."

Istar gave a quick, convulsive shudder, but Ramûa hardly noticed her. "Baba!" she cried, in terror. "Baba was in the temple of Bel!"

Charmides turned very white, and Istar suddenly threw back the veil from her face. "And Baba—Baba, too!" she said, mournfully, her voice ringing like a knell.

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But seeing the woman, Ramûa and her mother forgot what they said. The two of them stood transfixed by her undreamed-of, supernatural beauty. Her pallor was something incredible, and the unearthly purity of it, the light in the great eyes, the bluish shadows that lay on the skin, were enough for the moment to make one forget death itself. As she looked, Beltani perceived something that caused her to start. She took an impulsive step forward, and then halted again as Istar's eyes came slowly to the level of hers.

"What seest thou?" asked the woman.

Beltani went forward again and laid a finger upon Istar's neck, and as she drew it away Istar shuddered convulsively.

"What is it?" demanded Charmides, in a thick voice.

"The plague."

There was a momentary silence as the four that stood there gave the words time to penetrate. Then Istar, quivering again, started suddenly towards the door. Charmides barred her way.

"Where goest thou?" he asked, gently.

"Out! Out into the Great City! Let me go, Charmides! Let me go!"

With what little strength she had Istar threw herself upon the Greek, that he might give way and let her escape from his house. But Charmides was firm, and his strength infinitely greater than hers. After a struggle of a few seconds Istar gave way and would have fallen upon the floor had not the young man caught her about the body, lifted her in his arms, and carried her, lifeless and unresisting, into the little-used inner room where, at this moment, Bazuzu lay asleep. The black slave was quickly roused and Istar was placed upon a hurriedly arranged bed. Then Charmides returned again to his wife and sternly commanded her to retire to her room up-stairs, forbidding her to enter the lower rooms of their dwelling while Istar should be there. Both Bazuzu and Beltani had had the plague, and were in no danger from it. But Charmides himself, like Ramûa, was relegated to the upper rooms and to the roof.

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The moment that her body rested upon a bed, poor as it was, Istar fell asleep, and there, in the great weight of her sickness and her grief, lay for many hours insensible to all things. As the heat of the day came on, and the atmosphere of the small and ill-ventilated room became more and more stifling, Bazuzu took his place at her side, and minute by minute, hour by hour, fanned to her lips what air there was, while his own face streamed with perspiration and his breath came in gasps. His eyes, the eyes that had so tenderly watched the childlike slumbers of Ramûa and Baba, now looked upon her whose face had been the wonder of the East, whom he himself once had seen clothed in blinding radiance, seated upon her golden car in a procession of the great

gods and who now lay here, alone and friendless, shorn of her divinity, stricken with disease, to die a pauper's death or to live on to a hideous old age.

Istar suffered in her sleep. Whether it was the memory of the horror of the past night or the pain of disease racking her body could not be told. But Bazuzu heard her moans with heartfelt pity. Over and over again she spoke two names, one of which the slave could scarcely understand, the other that of the dead prince of Babylon. They were the names of her baby and of her husband, all that world of happiness that had gone, and that was calling to her out of the shadowy past.

Like every one in the clutch of the dread sickness, Istar thirsted continually, yet shrank, nauseated, at the mere sight of water or milk. Continually Beltani brought and held to her lips the refreshment that she craved, as often to have it thrust away with a gesture of pitiable repulsion. At length, seeing there was no other way, Bazuzu held the sick woman fast pinioned on the ground, while Beltani poured down her throat a pint of freshly cooled water. Over the first swallow Istar's struggles were convulsive, but after that she drank eagerly all that was given her, and when the last in the cup was gone she opened her burning eyes in a mute appeal for more. This was refused, of necessity; but, in pity for the heat of her fever and the closeness of the room, Beltani had her carried out and laid down near the door-way of the living-room, where presently she sank into a sleep that changed gradually to a heavy stupor.

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Noon passed and left the city streets quivering with heat. From the burning desert in the west came a faint breath of wind, that twinkled blue and white in the air till the eyes were blinded and the brain reeled under its intensity. Charmides and Ramûa were sitting together on the gallery outside their room in an upper story of the tenement, looking off to the shining strip of canal beyond which rose the patch of shrivelled green where, two months before, Ribâta's garden had blossomed with many a fragrant rose and fragile lily. Charmides was mentally preparing himself for another journey across the desolate city to the temple of Bel, that vast tomb in which so many tangled bodies lay. He had not yet voiced his intention to Ramûa, though he knew that she would not oppose it.

Suddenly round the corner of the tenement, into the open square, came a strange thing: a human being, crawling upon hands and knees along the brick pavement, halting now and then in visible exhaustion, but displaying also a nervous eagerness in its movements; and all the way behind it as it came was left a deep, red trail. A mere heap of bloody rags at first it seemed; but presently, as he watched, Charmides could see a mop of long, black hair that fell to the ground upon one side.

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"That is a woman, Ramûa," he whispered.

Ramûa, white to the lips, grasped his arm. "Go! Go to her, Charmides!" she responded, a breathless fear coming on her.

"What is it, Ramûa? What is thy thought?" questioned the Greek.

"I do not know. Go thou, Charmides! Haste! Haste! She falls!"

Thereupon Charmides went, slowly at first, still staring in a half-puzzled way at the little heap of bruised flesh that now lay inert upon the bricks below. Then his pace quickened, for he realized the woman's need. Along the gallery and down the stairs he ran, and then, at breakneck pace, crossed the space between the wounded creature and the door-way of the tenement. Ramûa, straining her eyes after him, saw him bend over the fallen one, and then thought that a cry came from his lips.

Hardly a cry, more a groan of utter horror it was. Charmides' heart was in his throat. For a second the blue eyes closed to shut out the pitiable sight, and then opened again upon Baba. It was Baba that lay there before him: Baba who, mangled as she was, had, in the gray dawn, crawled out from the bodies among which she lay in the temple, and since then had come upon her hands and knees, inch by inch, foot by foot, all across the Great City, to her old home, to him that stood over her now. She had allowed herself the untold luxury of unconsciousness only when the journey's end was reached, when at last she was at the door-way of the place of her early poverty, her great happiness, her life-sorrow.

Charmides knelt beside her, and, with a little quiver in which pity and fear for her were evenly mingled, lifted her in his arms. She stained his tunic with blood; but presently he perceived that this blood was not all Baba's own. It was caked in clots upon her torn garments; it smeared her rich sandals; it matted her hair. Yet on her body there was, so far as he could yet determine, only one wound—a deep stab in the back of her left shoulder. From this the blood had almost ceased to flow, coming only in a little trickle when she drew a longer breath than usual.

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Charmides bore the light form, face downward, towards the stairs of the tenement, thinking rapidly as he went. A horrible sight, truly, to lay before Ramûa. Yet Ramûa must see it. Carry her into those rooms where Istar lay in the delirium of the plague, he dared not. Nowhere else—yes, there was one other place. There was the home of Baba's master. Should he take her there before Ramûa guessed her identity? Ribâta's house would be open to her. And yet—and yet—it was here that Baba herself had chosen to come, as she might well believe, in death. That mute appeal could not be withstood. Here, because she had asked it, she must remain.

Step by step up the stairs to the gallery he bore the pathetic burden. At the top of the flight stood Ramûa, face colorless, eyes wide with a fear that she would not admit to herself. Charmides,

looking up, met the look, answered it, and saw his wife's hands go up to her head.

"Charmides! It is not—" she stopped.

"It is Baba, my beloved. Baba is alive. She has come home to us, Ramûa, to be cared for. Be thou brave, then. Go down and bring water wherewith to wash her, and a clean tunic of thine own to put upon her; and then together we will bind her wound."

A little while and the sunset came, and Babylon was aureoled again in crimson. Not till then did Ribâta's slave come back to consciousness in her sister's arms. The horror of the past night had stamped itself as indelibly upon her mind as on her body. Between fits of trembling she poured out to Ramûa the story of the fight in the temple and the massacre of the women. Charmides, standing outside the door on the gallery, listened to the tale as he looked off across the quiet city. [Pg 464]

"And Istar, Istar, our divine lady, I did not behold at the side of Belitsum the queen, nor with the women of the royal house who lie together now in the centre of the dead. May the great gods grant that she and her lord, Belshazzar, together escaped death and are free—somewhere—in the city."

"Baba, the Lady Istar is here—below—sick of the plague; and our mother and Bazuzu are at her side."

"The Lady Istar! Here!" Baba struggled to sit up, but Ramûa kept her firmly down while she told her the story of Istar's coming; how Charmides brought her to them crazed with her grief and with her long wandering.

Baba listened closely, and at the end of the recital her tears flowed fast. "Belshazzar, then, is dead!" she whispered more than once. "The mighty prince is dead, and Istar is alone—alone—even as I."

But now, while Ramûa wiped her tears away, Charmides came in to them, saying: "Across the square from the canal come two men in the livery of the house of Ribâta. I go forth to meet them. If it is for thee they come, Baba, what word shall I give to them?"

Baba gave a long sigh, and her eyes closed. "I am here. Seeks my lord for me? I am my lord's. I will return to him when I may."

And with this reply Charmides went forth to meet the messengers.

Ribâta's men halted at the foot of the steps, waiting his descent; and the Greek found that he had guessed aright when he surmised the object of their coming. My Lord Ribâta, terribly wounded, stricken with great grief at the downfall of the city and the massacre of all his women, had dispatched messengers to the only place where news of his favorite slave could be had, if mayhap she had by a miracle escaped the general carnage. Charmides dutifully gave them Baba's message, saw their faces light up with amazement and pleasure, and bade them, if they would carry Baba to their lord, go fetch the easiest of litters, that she might not suffer more than necessary on the way. [Pg 465]

This was done. In less than an hour two litters halted in front of the tenement of Ut, and in one of them was Ribâta himself, his head, breast, arms, and one limb wrapped in heavy bandages, so weak that his voice was but a whisper, yet a whisper of joy that one little creature out of all the multitude had escaped death in the temple. Baba was carried down to him, and their meeting had in it much of pathos. Ribâta's career was ruined, his position gone, his lord dead, his house in disorder; yet one thing was left to him, and her, in great joy, he took to his heart. Charmides and Ramûa, side by side, stood listening as Ribâta whispered to his slave the two words that changed the lives of them all.

"Baba—my wife," said he. And then presently, together, they were carried away into the evening.

While Charmides and Ramûa went back to their room to talk over the great thing that had come to Baba, Beltani, below, was preparing for the doleful night. She had kindled a little fire, cooked food for herself and Bazuzu, and was now on her knees offering up incantations to Namtar, the demon of the plague. Bazuzu, from his place beside Istar, joined at intervals in the prayers, which the sick woman, now in the violent delirium of fever, broke in upon continually with appeals for help and wails of grief over Belshazzar, who never left her thoughts.

In many a house and hovel in the Great City a similar scene was enacted to-night. Yet there could not be one more deplorable than this. She who raved upon the bed of straw in the heart of the most poverty-stricken quarter of Babylon—from what things was she descended? One by one she had lost everything that had made her life wonderful. Now the last, that attribute that she had left uncounted because it seemed to her indestructible, was going from her. In the next five days of this horrible sickness her beauty fled away, and she was left a thing dreadful for mankind to look upon. [Pg 466]

By the second day of her attack, the mental disturbance had increased till the intervals of her sanity entirely disappeared. On the morning of the third day began those violent constrictions of the heart that caused unspeakable agony and brought her to the brink of the black abyss. By this time, also, the enlargement of glands, or buboes, the dominating symptom of the plague, had become frightful to see. Her eyes were suffused with a thick, white matter. Upon her body came forth great carbuncles. On the fourth day dark spots, patches like black bruises, and long, livid

stripes, appeared upon her fair skin. The fever, now at its height, burned itself out in a day, and Istar fell into a cold and quiet stupor, the first stage of death. Her lips were black. Her eyes had closed. Her body had become something from which Beltani shrank at sight, and old Bazuzu touched only because of his great pity for the woman. Also at this time Istar's veil of hair, which had been wont to conceal her under its silken meshes, fell out in great masses and was burned by Beltani as a sacrifice before the demon of the plague.

Beltani's prayers to Namtar, however, had lost their sincerity, for the old woman could not in her heart wish Istar to live in her terrible disfigurement. Istar herself did not yet know what she had become. But unless, as seemed most probable, she died, there must soon come a time when she would discover, when she would see people shrink away from contact with her, yet turn to stare after in that fascination that a dreadful sight draws forth. Out of pure reverence for what Istar had been, Beltani attended her faithfully. Every herb and medicine and charm within her means and known to her she used to mitigate the sores, and to make the after-scars less terrible. Yet she, and Bazuzu also, felt that death were now the greatest boon for the woman.

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Death did not come. In spite of her stupor and her low temperature, the fatal eighth day passed, and on the morning of the ninth Istar lived and was better. She regained a dim consciousness, and the strength to ask for food, which was given her in minute quantities, as also milk and wine. For forty-eight hours she hovered on the brink of reawakening; and then, finally, she found herself.

On the morning of the fifteenth of the month Istar opened her eyes in the early dawn. She was alone. On the other side of the room, upon her pallet, Beltani lay in a heavy sleep. Bazuzu was outside in the square. Istar moved her hand and sighed. She felt life coursing through her veins, and remembered the past week with only a vague, nightmarish sense of oppression. The air of the morning, hot as it was, had in it the gathered sweetness of the long, starry hours. She breathed it with joy; and for a moment forgot the sorrow that must be hers perpetually. Presently, with an old and habitual gesture, she lifted her hand to her head to push away her hair. And her hand touched the head. There was no hair upon it. Rather, two or three thin strands hung about her ears. Otherwise she was bald.

The heart of Istar gave a peculiar throb. She held up both hands before her eyes; and, as she saw them, she herself shrank. The hands, those fragile hands, the fair, white wrists, the arms, were spotted and streaked and swollen and hideously scabbed. She touched her cheek and found raw flesh upon it. She tore the covering from her neck. It was the same. Everywhere—everywhere, from head to foot, over her whole body—she was accursed. It was the plague—the plague! Istar tottered to her feet and uplifted her eyes. Poor, weak eyes! Yea, she was all but blind. With one low, wailing cry the afflicted one let herself slowly down, till she lay prone upon the kindly floor that did not hesitate to receive her. And there, through time and the day-dawn, she wept out the burden of her soul. But of the future and its inevitable suffering she could not think. As yet the way was too dark, too incomprehensible to her.

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There upon the floor, motionless, Bazuzu found her two hours later. For long minutes he stood over her, helpless, pitying, knowing that there was no comfort to bring. But his heart was full as he felt the abandon of her attitude. Presently, kneeling at her side, he laid a horny hand gently upon one of her shoulders. And from his fingers a message of mute sympathy went forth to her. When she could bear that he should look upon her she lifted her head and opened her half-closed eyes to him. Then she spake, quietly, but with authority:

"Let my veil be brought, that I may put it upon me."

From the corner where it had lain, carefully folded by Beltani, Bazuzu brought it to her—the soft, black, silver-shot covering of her happiness. In silence he watched the woman put it on, wrapping it about her so that her head, her face, her arms, her form, were completely shrouded. Then, from behind the veil, she spake:

"Let no man evermore seek to behold me in my disfigurement. Behold, no longer am I Istar, but a wanderer over the face of the earth. I go forth from this house of friendliness. The voice of the great God bids me follow out my life in desert places, in the lands of my enemies."

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Bazuzu, from her words still believing her more than mortal, bent his head in silent acceptance of her desires. She took two or three quiet steps to the door, and then, when he had thought her gone, turned again, and softly said:

"Thou, Bazuzu, and thy mistress, and the young Greek whose house this is, take what thanks I have to give thee, and the blessing of All-Father for thy mercy to me, an outcast. Gold have I none, nor riches of any sort in payment for your labor. But from my heart I bless thee for thy compassion."

Then, like a shadow, she glided out at the door, across the deserted square, down to the canal of the New Year, and along its bank, out into the city. Through the long morning she moved through the streets, accosting no one, stared at by the multitude, but unaddressed. Her miserable body burned and ached. The sun poured down its blue-hot rays upon her head. Muffled as she was in the veil, she was like to suffocate for air to breathe, yet she would not expose herself to the gaze of human beings. It was noon when she entered the square of the great gods and passed the door of the temple of Nergal, looking with weary eyes into its vast and cool interior. At some distance within was a group of priests, Sangû, Enû, and Barû, men of importance in their several stations. These the plague-stricken eyes of the woman failed in the dim light to see. But she was startled

suddenly by the appearance in the door-way of one of them, who, catching a sight of her, had run quickly forward, and now stood eagerly staring at her form. She did not draw back from the look, and presently the priest spoke:

"Thou that standest shadow-like before me—art thou she whom they called Istar of Babylon?"

"I was Istar of Babylon," came the gentle voice.

"*Was!* Comest thou from Ninkigal?" The priest started back from her, turning a little pale.

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"Nay. Still I live; yet now am nameless."

"Thou hast dwelt as a goddess in the temple of Istar? Thou hast lived in the palace of the king as the wife of Belshazzar?"

Istar bent her head.

"Enter, then, into the temple, that I may speak with the others here before you." He motioned her to pass into the building, and, obediently, Istar entered it. She stood at a little distance, while he that had accosted her returned to the group of his companions and spoke with them. In a few moments they summoned Istar to their midst. She came quite close, and they eyed her in silence for a little while. Then one said:

"Ay. It is Istar of Babylon. I saw her thus from afar on the night of the feast of Tammuz."

"She is well found. Istar, for eight days hast thou been sought throughout the Great City. Kurush, the conqueror, demands thy presence before him. He has heard of thee and thy beauty, and the strange things thou art said to know; and he would have beheld thee on the day after the taking of the city. But we have searched for thee in vain. Where hast thou hidden?"

"I fulfilled my days. I will go now, if he wills, before the great conqueror. Haste were best, for the time to the end is not now long."

The priests looked at each other uncertainly. Her words had in them a ring of prophecy. They consulted for a little among themselves, till Istar herself made all things easy for them:

"Let a swift runner be sent to the camp of Cyrus, and let the great king be told that, one hour after the departure of the messenger, I come to him. In that hour I will rest here in the temple, for I am weak in body. Then ye may lead me out by the gate of Bel to the camp of the conqueror, and there shall ye leave me. From that camp let no man follow me forth. Now have I spoken."

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And the priests heard the words of Istar and found them to be good; and that which she had commanded was done.

XXI KURUSH THE KING

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The camp of the invading army lay spread over the sun-burned plain like a camp of the dead. There was hardly a sign of life round any of the many-colored tents. The very horses and pack-mules, tethered in a herd in the midst of the desert of dry grass, lay for the most part panting with heat, pining, no doubt, for the distant, breezy hills of fair Iran and the snowy highlands of Media, where they had been born and bred. Those of the soldiers not quartered inside the city lay under the shadow of their tents, hardly caring to exert themselves to speak, sleeping if they could, drinking as much as was to be had if they could not. Almost the only person abroad in the noontide was the commander himself, who, with one companion, was going through the camp, making one of his impromptu examinations of his men and their armament. Hardened as he was by years of campaigning in strange countries, Cyrus to-day found Babylon as unbearable as any one. His body was damp with sweat, and his breathing, as he walked, was audible. The blue quiver of heat that came from the great desert near by made his eyes bloodshot, and caused him to see with no little difficulty. Still, remonstrate as he would, the white-robed man that walked with him succeeded only in making Cyrus more thorough and more lingering at his task.

The commander's two sons, however, had not the energy of their father. They lay on divans in the royal tent, Bardiya, the younger and more favored of the two, strumming idly on a musical instrument; Cambyses, content to be still, drinking bowl after bowl of a concoction supplied by a slave, pausing occasionally in the bibulous process to curse at the flies and winged insects that swarmed about him. Presently, looking over at his brother, who for the moment had ceased to play, he asked, civilly:

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"In thy pilgrimage of yesterday, Bardiya, didst discover any cool spot in the city yonder?"

Bardiya drew himself together with a little gesture of disgust, and his brother's features broadened with a grin. "Babylon is city of filth, of disease, of death. Thousands within it die of the plague. Those that sicken and those that are dead lie alike in the open streets. There is no relief. The very river runs like molten metal. On the pavement bricks the flesh of a slain animal could be roasted to a turn. I go no more to Babylon."

Cambyses laughed. "And her whom you sought, Bardiya—she loved you not?"

Bardiya, highly displeased at the tone, replied: "She is not in the city; or, if she is, no man knows where she lies hid. Some say that she ascended to the silver sky with the spirit of Bel-shar-utsur, who was her husband. Again they tell me she was murdered with the other women in the temple of Bel-Marduk, on the night we took the city. Howbeit, no man really knows whether or not Istar of Babylon still lives."

Cambyses laughed again. "Istar of Babylon! A myth! She lives no more than any other god. Think you the great Ahura comes down among men, a man?"

But Bardiya's faith would not be shaken, and he had begun an elaborate protestation, when the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Cyrus, returning from his round with Amraphel of Bel at his side. At the entrance of their father the young men rose and saluted him with a respect that was the more marked because both of them utterly ignored the presence of the high-priest.

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Amraphel's bearing was a curious contrast to that of the conqueror. It was replete with affectation and bombastic dignity, and whatever mortification he felt at the want of recognition shown him by Cyrus' sons, was manifested only by an increased loftiness of carriage.

The king seated himself in an ivory chair before a little stone table that stood in the centre of the tent, and he motioned Amraphel at the same time to a stool at his side. No sooner was he seated than the priest began to speak upon what was evidently a continued subject, already much discussed. And though his tone was in itself sufficiently self-satisfied, the terms in which he spoke were exceedingly unlike those that he had been accustomed to use to the whilom king of Babylon. Where once had been unutterable arrogance and supercilious disdain of everything, was now eager flattery, cajolements, toadyism, and unceasing assurances of devotion. In the Elamite of plebeian parentage, Amraphel had found a none too complacent master.

"And does my lord the king think his city ill-governed, that he is not content to remain in safety outside its unhealthy walls? Nay, great Kurush, thine every command, to the least of them, is given there by me, and strictly obeyed by those in office under me. As I have said, the city is loyal to you, through my teachings."

Cyrus bit his beard impatiently. "It is not that I fear lest my commands be disregarded. You I hold responsible for their fulfilment. It is that I would better know what commands to give. Here am I, native of another land, ignorant of Babylonish ways, of Babylonish needs, knowing no one street, no temple in all the city, striving to govern it from this camp outside the walls. It is folly, priest!"

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"Nay, most mighty king. What the people need, I know. What they want shall be given. Fear not —"

"*Fear not!*" Cyrus turned on him with such a look that the high-priest started in confusion and shrank away a little, while from his corner Cambyses laughed harshly; but Bardiya scowled at the presumption of the priest. At sound of the laugh Amraphel flushed with anger; and Cyrus, controlling himself again, observed, in a gentler tone:

"Yesterday Bardiya, my son, went into the city yonder; and his story of those that perish of the plague is grievous."

"The young prince, the son of my lord, came into the city!" exclaimed Amraphel, in chagrin. "Why, then, sought he me not in my house?"

"For the reason that he sought another and a fairer than thou, good Amraphel," replied Cambyses, in a highly impertinent tone.

"Whom didst thou seek, prince?" asked the priest, turning to Bardiya.

"Her whom they call Istar of Babylon."

"Ah! Where didst thou learn that name?"

"It is to be heard through all the east—and west—and north. No man but knows of the living goddess of Babylon. Yet within the walls of her city I found her not, nor any that could tell me where she dwelt. *Is there such an one, Amraphel?*"

"Now is it seven days since I sent asking that she be brought to me, or that I may have permission to go before her," observed Cyrus, thoughtfully. "Yet hath she not come, nor have I had any word from her."

"There was indeed an Istar of Babylon, who was wedded to Belshazzar, the dead tyrant. And her beauty, were it famed at all, were rightly famed over all the world. Yet was she no goddess: rather a sorceress, a witch, a demon, most wicked, most impure. Since the night of the taking of the city she hath been seen by no man. She it was, no doubt, that murdered Belshazzar the king, whom my lord commanded to be saved from death and to be brought before him. Now, doubtless, she hath taken his spirit with her down to her kingdom, down to Mulge, where she and he feast by day upon the dust of the dead, and by night upon the blood of living beings; for they are vampires. Yea, verily, Istar of Babylon is no more, O king."

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There was a little silence. Amraphel's words had been spoken with every appearance of sincerity; and the idea that he presented was sufficiently weird to appeal to the lively imaginations of the

Elamites. Bardiya gave a little sigh, and Cambyses and his father were for a moment lost in thought, when the party was broken in upon by a man that appeared suddenly in the door-way of the tent, and, seeing Cyrus and the high-priest together, bent the knee before them and asked permission to speak. He was a runner, or messenger, from the city, and as such his unceremonious entrance was pardonable—nay, customary.

"What wouldst thou, swift one?" demanded the king, good-humoredly.

"May the lord king of the city live forever! I am come with word from her that is called Istar of Babylon, whose presence before thee thou hast desired. Behold she follows me hither in one hour; and she sends her greeting to the great conqueror."

Cyrus, with a mixture of surprise and amusement, glanced at the priest, who was a fair picture of uneasiness.

"Say, runner," asked the king, teasingly, "the Lady Istar, did she rise before thee out of the ground from the land of Ninkigal? Came she forth before thine eyes? Or art even thou, perchance, a ghost?"

The man looked his bewilderment at the king, and this time Bardiya himself roared with laughter. [Pg 477]

"The Lady Istar is living. The message was given me by a priest of Nergal, who comes to conduct the lady before thee. I know no more, O king!"

"Then take thy leave, fellow," cried Cyrus, tossing him a shekel from his girdle, and smiling as the man prostrated with lightning-like rapidity and was up and gone from the tent like an arrow from the bow, ere Amraphel had time to speak.

Now the high-priest rose, and, with an air of angry dignity, demanded permission to retire. Cyrus gave it willingly enough, for the man wearied him, and continually angered him by his presumption. Thus, then, a moment later, the high-priest was mounting his chariot at the edge of the camp, and might presently have been seen rolling swiftly away in the direction of the gate of Bel.

Cyrus and his sons were left alone till the coming of her whose name had so long been familiar to them. At the end of half an hour Bardiya rose from his place, straightened his tunic, and went over to the door of the tent to look out upon the plain in the direction of the city. Cyrus and Cambyses were eating their delayed noon meal; but the younger man, whose vein of romance was marked, refused food, and stood here alone, looking out over the parched fields. From time to time his father asked if anything were to be seen of their promised visitor; and always came the reply:

"Neither chariot nor litter do I see."

Then finally, as all three of them grew impatient at the delay, the youth added: "But there are, near at hand, a company of priests on foot, and in their midst is some one clad in black. They come towards our tent. Perhaps—"

Cyrus came over and stood at his shoulder. "I think it is the woman," he said. And he was right.

The three of them, the great king in the centre, Cambyses on the right hand, Bardiya on the left, stood in the door-way of the tent as the little band of white-robed priests came up to them. There was a slow, sinking reverence on the part of the attendants, and from their midst came forth a tall, slight figure muffled in the silver-shining veil. Seeing her, the conqueror and his sons all three inclined their bodies, and then Cyrus stretched out his hand. [Pg 478]

"Istar of Babylon, we give you greeting in the name of Elam and Media, and we bid you welcome to this tent of the plain."

Istar bent her head, acknowledging the courtesy, but denied her hand to him that mutely asked it. Turning slightly, she dismissed the priests, who, remembering her commands, accepted the gesture and departed from her reluctantly.

Then Istar entered the tent and took the chair that Cambyses hastened to place for her. Cyrus also seated himself, but the young men stood. Now that speech seemed demanded of him, the great king looked a little uncertain of himself. He glanced at the concealing veil which the woman still kept close around her, and he longed greatly to ask for a sight of the far-famed face. Yet that was a request that he dared not make. Istar, however, read his mind without difficulty, and let her head sink sorrowfully upon her breast. It seemed to her at last that her cup of bitterness was full; and she whispered a little prayer into the silence. Cyrus caught three or four of her low words, and these gave him an opening for speech.

"You speak to the gods. Is it with the gods of Babylon that you hold communion, lady?"

"There is no god but God, great king; and Him, in their hearts, all men must worship."

Cyrus looked slightly puzzled, and his curiosity was stronger than ever. Yielding to an impulse, he leaned over, asking: "Istar of Babylon, who art thou?"

Istar glanced round her. "Let thy sons depart, that we may be alone," she said, in a quiet command. [Pg 479]

Cyrus made a gesture that the young men dared not disobey, and, however much against their wills, they quickly left the tent. In departing, Bardiya let fall the curtain at the door, so that the king and the king's visitor were alone in the pleasant half-light. Then Istar spoke: "Thou hast asked what I am, O king. Tell me first who art thou, and thereafter I will answer thee."

"I am Kurush, an Achæmenian."

"And I am Istar, a woman, sent of God to be punished on earth."

"Unveil thyself, woman. Let me behold that face that the world has worshipped."

Istar rose. She was trembling slightly in her great shame. Yet there was no hesitation in her movements. With a dexterous twist she flung off her veil and stood revealed before the conqueror in all her unspeakable ugliness.

Cyrus let a cry escape him. "Thou! Thou art not Istar of Babylon!"

She folded both hands across her breast and her dim eyes closed. "I am Istar of Babylon," she said, softly.

After the shock of first seeing her, the king had looked away. Now, as she stood there before him, mute and motionless, he struggled with himself to let his eyes return to her without outward betrayal of his feeling. When finally he looked again his brown orbs were clear and calm, and he showed no sign of repulsion. For one, two, three minutes he looked upon her face till, in spite of the frightful complexion, he began to perceive its fundamental beauty. Of her eyes, only, he could not judge. They were swollen, red, matterated, nearly closed. Otherwise he knew from what he saw that she had once been rarely beautiful. Only—always—she was hideous now—hideous beyond belief.

Knowing well his mind, how she revolted him, how strong was his desire to leave her presence, Istar still stood before the great king. It was her final mortification, and even her going forth from the temple of Bel under Amraphel's lash had not been so terrible to her as this. Yet now, by degrees, as if a magnetic current passed between them, some understanding of what she underwent came home to the warrior. Compassion and pity took the place of horror. His face grew very gentle, and, moving to Istar's side, he laid one hand on her cotton-clad shoulder.

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"Istar, thou hast greatly suffered. Is it not so?"

She shrank back from his touch as if she knew all that the move had cost him. But the question she answered freely, without hesitation.

"I have suffered, yea, by day and by night, for many months. I doubted the wisdom of the Lord, and I am punished. I became mortal. I loved; and that that I loved more than myself death hath taken from me. Fame, honor, riches, purity, love, and beauty are gone. Nothing now remains. The end draws near. From afar I hear the voice of my beloved calling me.

"Thou, O king, great king, lord of the gate of God, art at the zenith of thy glory. Thy greatest victory is won. Thy time here is not much longer. After thee come two that shall dispute the throne, and they shall fare forth from the world in the bloodshed of murder and self-murder. After them cometh one greater than either, that shall enter Babylon from another country. For him the sun grows golden. He shall put down usurpers from his seat; and for a little while shall hold and rule the kingdom with a strong and mighty hand. And then—I see the city slowly sink—under the weight of time. One more conqueror she shall know: a youth of iron from a land of gold. And he shall set the world aghast with his conquests; but he shall find his tomb there within the Great City of his conquering. After him the East grows black. The rose shall wither unseen upon her tree. Even to the banks of the great river blow thick the desert sands. Walls and palaces shall crumble away. And upon the broken stairs of the tower of Bel a jewel of great price lies for many centuries unheeded in the universal desolation. And for centuries, Achæmenian, thou shalt sleep, ere thou art known again as king of Babylon—the city of my lord."

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With the ending of her vision Istar smiled slowly upon him that watched her with troubled eyes. As the spell passed she trembled, and, stooping, picked up the veil that lay about her feet. Cyrus moved forward as if he would have stopped her.

"Speak on! Let me hear again that that thou hast foretold. Such prophecy as this no seer of my court hath ever made."

But Istar's fire was gone. The light in her face died away, and in its death Cyrus read her answer to his plea. Then she wrapped herself again in the covering that hid her plight, and from it, as from behind a mask, she spoke again:

"Thou, O Cyrus, who hast beheld me in mine ugliness, must carry with thee the memory of it forever. Yet know that Istar of Babylon hath humbled herself before thee as before no living man. My king is dead. In his place, by reason of thy gentleness and justice, I hail thee lord of Chaldea and of Babylon." And thereupon, before Cyrus understood what she did or could prevent the act, Istar knelt at his feet and touched them, the right and the left, with her forehead, in the manner of the day.

With a quick exclamation Cyrus lifted her up; but she spoke gently to him, saying:

"That that was written have I done. Censure me not. I but obeyed my law. Now fare thee well, O

king. The end cometh, and I go forth to meet it."

"Nay, Istar—hold! One question more! Thou, his wife, art accused of the murder of the king of Babylon, whom I commanded to be brought before me living and unhurt from the feast in the temple. How dost thou answer this accusation?"

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"Who hath accused me of the deed?"

"The priest of Bel."

"Amraphel?"

"Yea."

"Then I ask thee only why I should have killed him that my soul loves as it loved not God?"

"Knowest thou, then, the murderer?"

"He that accused me shall, in God's time, answer to that charge. But thou, Cyrus, see that thou punish him not. Thy hands are red with the blood of many slain in battle; and shall the slayer accuse the slayer? Now speak no more to me. I return again to the city."

In spite of her last bidding, Cyrus, slightly angered by her perfect assurance, would have spoken again, had he not found it to be a physical impossibility. It was in his heart to accuse her of his own accord of the death of Belshazzar. Yet he could not voice the thought. As she left the tent he moved after her to the door-way, whence he could look over the plain to the walls of the city. He saw the black-robed figure glide unaccosted through the camp and beyond it, in the direction that Amraphel had taken more than an hour before. And as he watched her Cyrus felt a great reverence spring up in his heart, and in the after-wonder at her bearing and her words he forgot how she had looked. And presently, as he stood there lost in thought, Bardiya came to his shoulder, asking, softly:

"My father, is she all that men have said?"

Cyrus hesitated in his reply. Finally, after a long pause, he answered of his own will: "More wonderful than any have said. She is a woman sent of God."

XXII AT THE GATE

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Istar went quietly over the plain towards the gate of Bel, by which she purposed re-entering Babylon, intending to pass the night in some one of the temples, those refuges for all the outcast paupers of the Great City. As she went, she thought upon Cyrus the king and her talk with him, and also of the prophecy that had been put into her mouth.

When she left the conqueror's tent her mind had been at rest. She had neither fear nor desire. But now, as she drew near the city gate, and could hear, as from a great distance, sounds of life coming from the rébit, or market, held outside Nimitti-Bel, she quickened with uneasiness and excitement. Coming nearer, she perceived that there was a great gathering in the mart, and it seemed to her that, over the general murmur of buyers and venders, one single voice was speaking. She did not recognize the tall, white-robed figure standing in the very centre of the throng, gesticulating as he spoke; nor could her ears distinguish any of his words. Quietly enough she came along her way, instinctively knowing that danger threatened her; while, in the square, Amraphel of Bel spoke to the gathering crowd of Babylonians and Jews, some of whom he himself had brought, some of whom had been here in any case, all of whom were now waiting for the inevitable return of Istar to the city.

It was in this wise that Amraphel addressed them:

"Hear ye, men and women! Listen, and heed the word!" He paused, while the noise in the marketplace grew gradually less. "Listen and heed, and obey my word!"

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"Now comes there among you one from the camp of Kurush the conqueror, who, in shame of guilt, hath not been equalled in the Great City. The woman of Babylon, the witch, the disciple of Namtar the plague-demon; she by whose hand Nabonidus and Belshazzar both have fallen; she who for so long polluted the holy sanctuary of Istar; she who, in her nameless wrath, visits the city with the great death; she who hath lain for days in the camp of the conqueror, vainly weaving her spells about his dauntless heart; she who hath, in sacrilege, been called Istar of Babylon, would now come once more among ye.

"My people, will ye let her in among your dead in the city? Will ye again receive her that hath wrought this infinite woe? Will ye not, rather, in the names of the great gods, drive her forth from the city gates with stones and scourges, as from your hearths by night you exorcise Namtar her companion?"

"Behold, there comes she among you, even now, black-veiled. In the name of Bel, our god, I bid ye drive her from your presence here in Babilû!"

Hardly comprehending at first the violent words of the high-priest, the people had listened open-mouthed. When, however, they understood that she whom he had designated as the incarnation of all evil was coming among them from the camp of the Elamite, there was a quick struggle to reach the front rank of the crowd. As yet the Babylonians were moved by curiosity rather than by wrath, for they were a slow people and not unreasonable. The Jews, however, as many as were there, were of a different temperament, and it was they that began, little by little, to raise that ominous, angry murmur that will quicken a mob to violence sooner than any speech of a professional anarchist.

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Among the throng was Charmides the Greek, come out an hour before to buy barley for his house, and remaining to chat for a time with the cheery countrymen that were unaffected by the depression of the city. Charmides had heard the words of Amraphel with a natural sense of horror, and now turned to look incredulously over the plain. There, fifty yards away, was she for whom he and Bazuzu had vainly sought since morning. There indeed was she, the tall, slight, black-clothed figure, advancing slowly towards the gate. In obedience to a quick impulse, Charmides ran hastily forth from the square and placed himself before her in her path. The ominous shouts of the mob behind him came clearly to his ears, but he paid no heed to them. He was within five feet of her before Istar recognized him from behind her heavy veil. Then immediately she spoke to him, in the poor, cracked voice that contained not a trace of its former melody.

"Comest thou from the city to meet me, O Greek? Among so many, yet I shall not lose my way."

"Lady Istar, turn thou back. Turn away from the gate! Amraphel there incites the mob to take thy life. Therefore be warned. Come thou with me. I will support you. We will enter the city later by another way."

Istar stopped and hesitated a little. She lifted her eyes to look at the great throng in the rébit, and she could read their intent from the attitude they took. Then she turned again to Charmides, who would have taken her about the body to help her on in her weakness.

"Nay, Greek!" She started back from him. "Lay not thy hand upon me! My very flesh is accursed! Thou givest timely warning, yet I go up to meet them that hate me. Have I not said the end is near? Seek not to hold the blessed freedom from me. Let us go up to meet them at the gate."

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Startled by the calm determination of her manner, Charmides could find no fitting remonstrance for her. Indeed, he knew at once that it were useless to attempt to combat her will. More, he felt it to be irreverent. Keeping, then, close at her side, hoping to shield her with his own body from those in the market-place, he walked with her up the gradual ascent to the gate. At first their approach was watched with murmurs of disapproval. The angry prejudice of the Jews was beginning to extend to the Babylonians also, and momentarily Charmides expected the first stone. But as she approached something in the bearing of the veiled woman stilled the voice of the mob. She was coming among them apparently without either fear or hesitation. It was perhaps her fearlessness that sent the little tremor of shame into the minds of most of the company. Amraphel saw this almost instantly, and quickly set to work. There was a slight movement along the face of the mob, and when Istar stood within fifteen feet of them she found herself confronted by a solid line of Jews that looked upon her with a cold impassivity that foreboded an evil ending to this strange hour.

Seeing that her way was barred, and by what immovable men, Istar finally halted. She looked about her from side to side, betraying for the first time a little uncertainty of manner. It was as if the guiding spirit that had so far led her was suddenly gone; as if at last she was alone, unprotected, mentally and physically, before an inimical world. With a little gesture of bewilderment she turned to the Greek at her side.

"Charmides," she said, faintly, "what do they here? Why do they oppose my coming?"

"Men of Babylon," shouted Charmides, commandingly, "open your ranks! Let the Lady Istar pass through to the gate of Bel!"

A low, sullen murmur of refusal rose from the men in the front line. Not one of them moved. There was not so much as a glance of encouragement for Charmides in his hopeless championship of the woman. Nevertheless the Greek cried again:

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"What right have ye to forbid that she enter the city?"

Then came a voice from the midst of the throng, a strident voice, and one harsh with age, known too well both to Istar and to her protector. "The witch of the plague shall enter no more into the city. Long enough, creature of Namtar, hast thou worked destruction among us. Let the demon thy master save thee from our wrath!" And with the last words a piece of broken brick was hurled from out of the throng, striking Istar upon the shoulder.

Instantly Charmides sprang in front of her, but, violently trembling, she pushed him back. Quite alone, quite unprotected, she faced the mob, even advanced to them a step or two, while she asked, faintly:

"What is this that ye call me? Servant of Namtar? Witch of the plague?"

"Yea verily, wicked one!"

"Witch!"

"Sorceress!"

"Murderess!"

With the last word two or three more stones came towards her, one of them striking her upon the knee, another passing just over her head.

Istar drew a long sigh, and for an instant she closed her world-weary eyes. Thereafter, with a slighter movement than she had used before Cyrus, she caused the veil to fall from her form, and stood exposed in all her pitiable plight before the pitiless mob that had gathered against her.

Instantly there came a chorus of wonderment and of repulsion, with which a weak note of compassion was mingled. Charmides, who now saw her face for the first time since the morning after the massacre, started with horror.

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"Behold, the mark of the plague is upon me. How then do ye call me servant of Namtar?" she said.

"Sorceress! Beneath the veil thou hast transformed thyself! Take thy true form!" cried Amraphel from the throng.

At this accusation a howl of anger suddenly rolled over the childish multitude. At last, almost by accident, they had been successfully roused to fury against the helpless creature before them.

"Thy true shape, witch!"

"Thy true shape!"

"Fly, if thou canst, from our wrath!"

"Pray Namtar to save thee now!"

And then, dropping articulate speech, the mob prepared themselves for their revenge against the demon's minion.

Drops of sweat rolled down Istar's face. Faint for food and greatly suffering from weariness, she swayed where she stood. Charmides, overcoming his repulsion, remembering her as she had once been in the days of her great glory, threw his arm about her and supported her.

"Dogs!" he cried, angrily, "the woman is weak and sick of the plague. Will ye still keep her from the city wherein she must rest?"

"Shall we admit a murderess among us?" shouted one of the Jews, wrathfully.

"Murderess? What creature have I slain?"

"Dost thou deny the murder of thy husband, Belshazzar, on the night of the feast?" demanded Amraphel from the midst of the throng.

"Belshazzar! My beloved!—*I?*" A great sob burst from the lips of the woman. For a moment she could feel again about her the dying arms of him whom she had loved more dearly than godhead. The tears flowed fast down her scarred cheeks. Before the wave of grief she bent her head low.

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"Behold, she confesses! She dares not deny! Murderess! Murderess!"

The voice of the mob grew deafening; and now bricks and stones came forth upon her in a shower. They struck her in many places, bruising her head, her breast, her scantily clothed arms, her broken body. Under the blows she cowered like a wounded animal, uttering no sound.

"Istar, Istar, come away with me! Fly! Here is death if we remain. Come!"

Charmides seized hold of her while the missiles were striking them both in great numbers. Then, taking her up bodily, the Greek turned and fled rapidly down the hill-slope in the direction of the nearest shelter, a broad palm-grove upon the river-bank. For a few moments Istar was helpless; but he found, to his immense relief, that they were not pursued. When at last they were beyond danger Istar shuddered and cried to be put down. He set her anxiously upon her feet and found that she could walk.

"If I had but wine to give thee!" he exclaimed, as he saw her weakness.

"Nay, Charmides, thou hast saved and greatly helped me. I give thee blessing from the heart. And now thou must leave me, that I may go alone down to the river. Fear not. None will accost me. I am well."

The Greek would have protested against letting her go, but that he had an unaccountable feeling that a higher force than hers was dominating both of them. Therefore, after a glance into her uplifted face, he fell upon his knees before her, and bent his head before the will of the Almighty that was over them. And there, while the sunset shed its light around them like a halo, Istar turned away and went forth alone in the sunset light, to the grove of palms upon the bank of the quietly flowing Euphrates.

XXIII THE SILVER SKY

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Never, in all the days of Babylon, had there been an evening more fair than this. At sunset the burning day melted and flowed away, down the western sky, in a flood of liquid gold. A faint breath of air came over the river from across the distant Tigris, out of the cool hills of Elam, the conqueror's land. On the river-bank rose the palm-trees, casting their shadows into the softly slipping water; and the turf beneath them was all strewn with sunset gold. To the north lay Babylon, huge and black and silent, her dying thousands shut away behind the vastly towering walls. To the west and south stretched great irrigated fields of ripening grain, in the midst of which were many shadufs, with their patient buffaloes at the interminable work of drawing water from the clay wells. Still farther back were the crumbling brick huts of the tillers of the soil. On the edge of the river two long-legged cranes stood quietly meditating. Overhead a flock of pelicans wound their slow way southward towards the marshes where they dwelt. From the far distance was heard the loud cry of the bittern. Otherwise the land was silent—wrapped in evening prayer.

Along the river-bank, under the shadowy palms, with the golden light glowing about her, walked Istar, musing gently upon many things. Voices from the infinite addressed her. The iron was leaving her soul. Her mind was transfused with quietude. She ceased to notice or to feel the aching of her bruised body. She was holding communion with deeper things, and she moved with her head bent forward and her eyes upon the ground. Presently she paused at the brink of the river—the fair, well-flowing river, that held in its pure depths the body of the storm-eyed, her beloved. Its flashing waters encompassed her with glory. Her mortal eyes grew blind with light. Presently, out of the glowing depth, there came to her, as once before, a voice—but now a voice most familiar, most dear to her ears, most longed-for since its silence. Belshazzar spoke from the beyond, in the words that Allaraine had written on the temple wall, and that had appeared to her again from the river, on the night of death:

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"Hast thou found man's relation to God? The silver sky waits for thy soul."

And now in the heart of the woman was no bitterness, no rebellion, only knowledge of the truth. And, answering the question of the Lord, spoken in the voice of her dead, she whispered, softly:

"Man and man, as man and God, are bound by those ties of eternal love that made the covenant of Creation. Consciously or unconsciously, all living things must live with this as their law, for they are God's children, God's brothers, God Himself sent forth to wander for a while in time, but in the end returning to their eternal source, which is God.

"All the sin, all the sorrow of the world, I have known, have suffered. Yet no loss nor grief can take away the great joy of love, its purity, its perfection.

"I acknowledge the wisdom of the All-Father displayed in His creation. Let Him do with me as He will."

As she ceased to speak a blinding, silver stillness wrapped her about and held her immovable. From its depths in the far-off heavens there came to her ears sounds such as she had known in the long-ago: the song of the infinite, the infinite, unceasing chorus, the wind-choir that sings the Creator's hymn.

Still she could see the green fields and the water, and the ferny palms above her head. Still she beheld the broad river running full of pink and molten gold. Still the breath of the evening wind came to her lips. The world was all about her; but she was no longer of it all.

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High over her head, in the unclouded sky, a vast web of shimmering silver was spreading out and out, like a broad, firmly woven veil. It scintillated with dazzling light into Istar's upraised and half-blind eyes, yet it struck them with no pain. It was the silver sky of Babylonish dreams opening above her, while the celestial voices sang ever more softly, but ever more beautifully, the pure, swaying harmonies of the great hymn of freedom. God's presence lived in the beauty of the earthly evening scarcely less than in the splendor of that heavenly one. In the midst of the scene of supernatural wonder, Istar sank to her knees, and there remained transfixed before the miracle that came to be enacted before her.

From out of the silver-spun cloud two figures, at first merely dense, opaque bodies of mist, began to descend from the heights, growing gradually more and more distinct in form as they came, leaving behind them a silver trail that moved and swayed, fine and threadlike, in the air, above them. As they approached her, Istar, in her ecstasy, quickly recognized them both; the one, his floating locks of deepest auburn star-crowned, his trailing garments of changing blue, carrying in his hand the sunset lyre, was Allaraine, the archetype of song. The second was more spiritual still, a storm-eyed being with thick, black locks uncrowned, clothed in misty white, girdled in silver, bearing in his hand a palm-branch of the same shimmering white metal, his face, hands, and feet showing transparently pure, while in his back, upon the left side, was a mark of brilliant light, glowing with ruby fire, and resembling a hallowed wound—the releasing dagger-stroke that had freed Belshazzar from Babylon—Belshazzar, beloved of the woman to whom he came again.

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Slowly, slowly, to that infinite, sweet chorus, these two descended till their celestial feet touched earth, and Istar, with joyful greeting, rose up and went to meet them. As she held forth both maimed, mortal hands, the eyes of Allaraine glowed with sorrow, but Belshazzar's face was alight

with the fulness of great joy.

"We come to thee, O woman honored of God; and thou shalt choose between us.

"I, Allaraine, thy brother, would lead thee back among thy fellows in thy great purification to the perfection of rest, of insensibility to all creation except God and His word."

"Istar, beloved, through suffering a soul, an immortal soul, hath been born in thee; and thou mayst come forth now to rest a little on the long pilgrimage that will lead thee finally back into the God whence all souls are sprung."

"Choose, Istar. Choose."

Istar turned her eyes to Allaraine and looked upon him long and earnestly, and her face grew radiant. Then, most slowly, she moved her gaze till it met with that of the great storm-orbs of Belshazzar. And in that look the worn-out body dropped from off her soul, which, clothed in garments of translucent light, began its ascent between the two messengers that had come for her. They passed, all three, above the shadowy turf, above the line of waving palms, above the glowing river which ran its threadlike course from distant Karchemish into the sunset gulf; above, finally, the towering black walls of the Great City, and so into the clouds of the silver sky, to which no mortal eye may follow them.

Through this last hour and the period of her transfiguration, Charmides, still standing at the edge of the grove of palms, had watched the figure of Istar upon the river-bank. Rejoicing in the great beauty of the evening, he waited peacefully, believing her wrapped in prayer. Nothing saw he of the celestial world that had opened to her, nothing knew of the heavenly messengers that had come. But when her body fell back upon the earth, he, thinking that she had fainted from exhaustion, ran quickly to the spot where his eyes had last beheld her. When he came to the place there was nothing there—no trace of the plague-marked form of her that had dwelt in the temple of Istar in the Great City. Long he searched there alone in the evening, till, out of the far, blue space a voice, the voice of the woman he had so worshipped, spoke to him:

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"Thou faithful and true, seek for me no more; for that of me which was not is not now. But my spirit shalt thou know to be watching near thee always. Behold, I am returned unto our Father."

So, knowing all things dumbly in his heart, the young Greek obeyed her voice, and, turning slowly away, went forth from the grove of palms, and returned that night alone to his young wife in Babylon.

THE END

Footnotes:

- [1] Jowett's translation of Plato's *Statesman*, vol. iii., pp. 562, 571.
- [2] Jowett's translation of Plato's *Phaedo*, vol. i., pp. 407, 408.
- [3] 541 B.C.
- [4] Herodotus gives it as higher than this, a few writers less, the greatest estimate being three hundred and seventy-five feet, the least seventy-five.
- [5] "*Bit*"—tribe, or family. A general prefix to the surname.
- [6] The worship of the goddess Istar began originally in the city of Erech.
- [7] Her archetypal name, Istar being only a cognomen, the name given her by the people.
- [8] According to the calculations of Babylonish historians.
- [9] The fish-god.
- [10] The incident of Nabu-Nahid's strange gods is an historical fact.
- [11] Fourteen miles.
- [12] An historical fact.

Transcriber's Notes:

The following is a list of variations in the spelling of personal and place names which have been retained:

- Agâdé / Agade
- Êa-bani / Êa-Bani
- Lillât / Lilât
- Nabu-Nahîd / Nabû-Nahid / Nabu-Nahid
- Nabopolassar / Nabopolassar
- Phoenician / Phœnician
- Tiamât / Tiâmat
- Vul-ramân / Vul-Ramân

The Incantation in the Prologue uses the spelling "archtype".

The following is a list of changes made to the original. The first line is the original line, the second the corrected one.

KABIR: A *Phoenician* trader, shipwrecked off the harbor of Selinous,
KABIR: A *Phoenician* trader, shipwrecked off the harbor of Selinous,

NABONIDUS: Or "*Nabu-Nahîd*, last native king
NABONIDUS: Or "*Nabu-Nahîd*", last native king

right side, oars-shattered, sides still uncrushed, while
right side, oars shattered, sides still uncrushed, while

heave-offerings of oxen and of doves.
heave-offerings of oxen and of doves."

Our voyage had been too long already.
Our voyage had been too long already."

her out.
her out."

Up to this point Theron and his son stood beside
Up to this point Theron and his son stood beside

"Y face and form, my Charmides, are beautiful--more
"Your face and form, my Charmides, are beautiful--more

is never his feeling for any other of her sex. Woman
is never his feeling for any other of her sex. Woman's

"Dishonor--in the rites of Ashtoreth! Nay, you
"Dishonor--in the rites of Ashtoreth! Nay, you

it was his home. But it was night before they entered
it was his home. But it was night before they entered

The great multitude hardly caught his attention. He
The great multitude hardly caught his attention. He

that from the first I have feared She is become no
that from the first I have feared. She is become no

"Bunantitûm Bit-Êgibi."
"Bunantitûm Bit-Êgibi."

thy companion, Ribâta of Skumukin?"
thy companion, Ribâta of Shumukin?"

the bed She gave a little cry of astonishment and
the bed. She gave a little cry of astonishment and

Chaldean kings that had done as much
Chaldean kings that had done as much.

"Belitsum--lady--what is thy grief?" He asked,
"Belitsum--lady--what is thy grief?" he asked,

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ISTAR OF BABYLON: A PHANTASY ***

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